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VICTRIX

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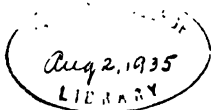
VITTORIA VICTRIX

BY

W. E. NORRIS

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VITTORIA VICTRIX

CHAPTER I

Parmi les aveugles le borgne est roi. That, I suppose, accounts for my being the successful and moderately famous sculptor that I am. I ought, no doubt, to be thankful that this country cannot at the present day boast of possessing any supreme genius in my branch of art, and there are moments when I do feel thankful; moments also when I am able to tell myself that my work is at least technically up to the mark. But there are other and sadder moments. There is that almost tragic moment when the completed work stares coldly at me in the form of plaster and seems to inquire, with sardonic irony, what I think of it. I make no reply, verbal or other; I neither swear nor seize a hammer and pulverise the confounded thing. What would be the use? One does one's best; one cannot, alas! improve upon one's best; and by the time that I read in the newspapers, some months later, how "Mr. Trathan's latest achievement shows no falling off from the high standard of excellence

associated with his name," I can generally bear the flattering assertion without wincing.

However, as I say, there is always that atrocious confrontation with the plaster cast to be gone through, and Miss Torrance could hardly have chosen a less favourable occasion to send me her card and her request for an interview than on that bright spring morning when I stood morosely contemplating a group destined to commemorate the heroic sons of a Midland city who had fallen during the Boer war. I did not know who Miss Torrance was, and I never receive visitors until the afternoon. This latter intimation I caused to be conveyed to the lady, with the result that in another minute she entered the studio and held out her hand to me, saying pleasantly—

"How do you do? Sorry to break your laws, but I thought, after having come all the way out to Hampstead, you know——"

What I thought, but of course did not say, was that laws are made for mortals, not for goddesses. Perhaps, as a matter of fact, Vittoria Torrance did not so very closely resemble the conventional classic goddess; but she had the neck and figure and the small, admirably-poised head of one, besides a pair of the most glorious brown eyes that it has ever been my privilege to behold, and the smile of a happy, friendly child. How could I greet such a being with the interrogative stare which her intrusion merited? I found myself, instead, searching about

for a rush-bottomed chair and flicking the dust off it.

She sat down, giving me a nod of thanks, and drew my attention to a small white dog who had trotted in behind her.

"I hope you don't mind my bringing Joshua," said she; "he won't break anything."

I stooped to pat the little wire-coated terrier, and while his short tail thumped the floor, he looked up at me with eyes less beautiful indeed, but no whit less expressive or less engaging, than his mistress's.

"Fond of dogs?" asked the latter. "Don't hurt his feelings by calling him a mongrel, please. He doesn't set up to be anything else, and he can't help it."

"He isn't a mongrel," said I, holding his chin in my hand and surveying his round head and his long legs; "he's a Jack Russell terrier."

"Ah!" exclaimed Miss Torrance, with evident gratification; "now I call that a really nice thing to say. It may even be partially true too; there's no knowing. His mother was very well bred indeed; but over Joshua's parentage there hangs a mystery which I am sorry to say has never been dispelled. Hence his name. Do you see?"

"Son of Nun?" I hazarded.

She inclined her small head in token of assent. "Not strikingly brilliant or original; but it's my father's little joke, not mine, and you would

appreciate the full value of it if you knew how very seldom my father perpetrates such a thing."

I can't think what prompted me to remark that my sympathy was assured to all those who lacked brilliancy and originality; for, whether I appreciated her father's rare humour or not, it was hardly to be expected that a girl who looked less than twenty should understand my chronic discontent. But she did. She understood it so well that she offered me no insincere compliments and only said consolingly—

"Oh, well, one can't be everything, can one? And when all's said, you *are* at the top of the tree. It's nice of you to be modest, though, for you might, if you thought it worth while, put on a certain amount of side."

"Such as declining to see ladies who call at forbidden hours?" I ventured to suggest.

Her low laugh was like the gurgle of a summer brook. "Oh, and that reminds me," said she, "that what I really came for was to ask a favour of you. I was wondering whether you would take me as a pupil."

She had so little the air of asking a favour or of entertaining any doubt as to my reply that I had to assume an apologetic tone in explaining that that sort of thing was not exactly in my line. Pupils I had, it was true; young men who attended my studio in a body on given days and received such

instruction as I could spare time to impart; but they were—well, in short, they were rather advanced.

"So am I," she averred; "I'm through all the preliminary stages. I studied in Paris last year and the year before, and I was considered quite promising for an amateur."

I might have told her that I had neither leisure nor inclination to be bothered with amateurs; but it seemed more gracious to base the necessary refusal on other grounds. So I said—

"I'm afraid there are difficulties. You would hardly like to be the only one of your sex amongst a number of students, would you?"

"No, I shouldn't; but if that's all, I can easily come alone at some other hour," she replied as calmly as you please.

Her taking it for granted that all my precious hours lay open for her to choose from struck me as less odd than her sublime disregard of the proprieties.

"Well, but," I meekly objected, "do you think your father would quite approve of such an arrangement?"

She looked puzzled for a moment. "My father?" Then, "Oh, I see! Yes, now that one comes to look at you, you certainly are a good deal younger than I thought you would be. How tiresome! I suppose Joshua wouldn't do?"

"As a protector," I answered, "I am sure he

would be thoroughly efficient; as a chaperon he might fall a little below the recognised standard."

She frowned in perplexity. "Then I don't know who there is, except Aunt Julia, who, of course, is much too busy. By the way, she was going to write to you about me, only she never has time to write half her letters; so that was why I came, without waiting any longer. I believe you know my aunt, Mrs Adare."

"Who doesn't?" was my reply.

"Ah, but I mean you're a friend. Well, perhaps the best plan will be for you to go and see her. Then you and she can settle the details between you."

"Perhaps that will be the best plan," I agreed.

I was surrendering, it will be observed; I was virtually making a concession the bare notion of which I should have laughed to scorn half an hour earlier. Why I did so I will not attempt to explain, for the very good reason that I do not know. All I can say is that, with one solitary exception, I have never met with a human being, male or female, capable of resisting Vittoria Torrance. She had, I suppose, the gift of facile and rapid conquest; but the constituent elements of that gift defy analysis. My sister Lydia says with decision that Vittoria carried all before her by virtue of her personality, which sounds more like the statement than the solution of a problem. In any case, Miss Torrance, having referred me to her aunt for the adjustment

of details, appeared to think that she had said all there was any need to say respecting matters of business, and she devoted the remaining ten minutes or so of her stay to examination and criticism of the various productions, finished and unfinished, by which she was surrounded. She displayed some discrimination, some ignorance, a good deal of enthusiasm. She was not, I gathered, very seriously in love with art, but she gave me the idea of being tremendously in love with life. When she took leave of me, Joshua rose upon his hind-legs, placed his fore-paws upon my knee, yawned, stretched himself, and slowly wagged his tail.

"That," said his mistress, "is a high compliment. Joshua has perfect manners, but he doesn't speak to anybody without being spoken to unless he has formed a distinctly favourable opinion of that person."

If the young lady did not share her dog's sentiments, she must, it seemed to me, be a very ungrateful young lady indeed. A total stranger flings open your closed door, thrusts her company and conversation upon you for nearly half an hour, orders rather than implores you to do for her what you would respectfully decline to do for a Royal Princess, and then departs without even saying, "Thank you very much, Mr. Trathan!" It all, upon retrospection, sounded so extremely cool, and my part in the interview looked so preposterously weak, that when I went into the house to lunch, I

decided not to say anything to Lydia about the episode.

Towards evening, however, I obediently journeyed by tube and on foot to Charles Street, Berkeley Square, where Mrs. Adare lives, and, strange to say, found the lean, restless little woman at home and alone. Being but indirectly and intermittently in touch with the great ones of the earth, I am unable to account for Mrs. Adare's acknowledged social, and even political, importance. The facts that she is rich, that she entertains perpetually and that she has aristocratic connections do not, of course, differentiate her from a host of other ladies who remain relatively obscure. Perhaps she is a power in the land because she likes power, because she is energetic, while the ostensibly powerful are apt to be indolent, because she is really a charitable, well-meaning sort of person and because she insists upon knowing everybody who has the slightest claim to be considered anybody. My claim, such as it is, had been admitted by her years back, and I may say that I had been promoted to the circle—the very comprehensive circle—of her intimates.

"You have come about Vittoria," she said. "So good of you to take her in hand, poor child!"

"It will certainly be rather good of me if I do," I answered, "but I am by no means sure that I shall."

Mrs. Adare laughed. "Oh, you will. Vittoria

seems to have set her heart upon it, and when Vittoria sets her heart upon anything!" . . .

I said that was all very fine, but I was a busy man. Young lady pupils made no sort of appeal to me, and before I submitted to the bore of being saddled with one I must really ask for a few particulars.

Mrs. Adare supplied these with concise brevity. Her niece was not a novice. She was extremely clever at modelling, had been well taught in France, and was, for the moment, bitten with the ambition to excel as a sculptress. "Oh, I don't say it will last; one hardly expects or wishes that sort of thing to last. But it's an added string to her bow, if you understand what I mean. Girls, I grant you, exist primarily for the purpose of being married; in the abstract, that's what they're for. Still, they can't have too many resources to fall back upon, and Vittoria is peculiarly situated in some respects. You never heard of my brother Felix, did you? Nobody ever does. He lives all by himself at his dreary place down in Lincolnshire, and only comes to London when he wants to consult a specialist."

"Doesn't his daughter live with him, then?" I inquired.

"Off and on. Most of her life has been spent at schools abroad, and latterly she has been more with me than with her father. The fact is—but I'll tell you some other time. I've got to bolt my dinner

and tear off to a meeting of the Ladies' Imperial Consolidation League, at which I've promised to take the chair."

The intimation could not be ignored; but before I withdrew I raised the question of chaperonage, at which Mrs. Adare seemed to be amused and surprised.

"My dear man!—in the twentieth century! Besides—how old are you, if it's allowed to ask?"

"Only thirty-one, little as you might suppose it, to look at me."

"Well, that's a difference of a dozen years. And you're not exactly . . . are you?"

"Not a bit," I answered. "At the same time, ill-natured things are said upon less provocation."

Mrs. Adare was already fidgeting in the direction of the door. "Of course," said she, "Vittoria might take her maid with her; only that would be such a nuisance for you, wouldn't it? Oh, but how stupid of me! There's your nice sister—the very thing. I'm afraid I *must* say good-bye now. *Au revoir*, and so many thanks!"

It was wonderful of Mrs. Adare to recollect that I had a sister and kind of her to assert that I had a nice one; but she is always wonderful in the way of remembering people, and, to do her justice, she is always kind, after her fashion. I imagine that, as a rule, she comfortably sets down her neighbours as being what she would have them to be.

That, no doubt, was why she concluded that Lydia was the kind of person to sit, with folded hands, in my studio while I taught a lovely and vivacious young woman how to manipulate lumps of clay.

CHAPTER II

It must not be supposed that I was afraid of my sister; I have never been one of the somewhat numerous persons who are. I say this in no spirit of boastfulness. Lydia's is an imperious temperament, while my instinct is always to seek peace and ensue it; so that if she wanted to bully me she probably could. But a convenient, if misplaced, reverence for my artistic abilities restrains her, and she rather likes to pose as my admiring subordinate. Lydia, though my senior by two years and an old maid by loud profession, has the appearance of being considerably younger than I, and is infinitely better looking. Built on a large, but finely-proportioned scale, blessed with regular features and with an abundance of that copper-coloured hair which is so much less frequently the gift of nature than of art, she was beyond question a handsome woman, and there was no earthly reason that I could see why she should not yet marry, save her deliberate consecration of herself and her life to the service of an unworthy brother. That she was indispensable to my comfort and well-being I will not deny. She had kept house for me ever since I had had a house to keep, and she now most admir-

ably ruled over the commodious dwelling, with a studio attached to it, which improved circumstances had justified me in purchasing at Hampstead. Naturally, therefore, I could not have surrendered her to any husband without a pang. She, on the other hand, had no more ardent wish than to see me happily and suitably mated. So she often said, and I daresay most people will understand what that meant. It meant, amongst other things, that she was very unlikely to view with a friendly eye the proceedings of Miss Vittoria Torrance, from whom I received a telegram early on the day after that of my visit to Charles Street, and who followed it up by making her appearance at three o'clock, bringing with her Joshua and a workmanlike brown-holland garment, but no superfluous lady's maid.

"Now," my self-constituted pupil began, "let me just show you what I can do."

She did some cleverish things in a remarkably short space of time. Her fingers were deft, her imagination was nimble, she had evidently studied the methods of the French school to some purpose. More than that I could not tell her at the end of what she was pleased to call her first lesson, although she had been taught nothing by me in the course of it. I took a few mental notes, but for the rest contented myself with watching her and listening to her; and indeed I think anybody who had not been contented to do so would have been rather

hard to please. "Oh, my dear young woman, if only you were a professional model, instead of an aristocratic dabbler!" I kept sighing to myself all the time. For the line of her neck, notwithstanding its partial concealment, was invaluable, and her head was set on as no Anglo-Saxon head ever has been or ever will be.

"You can't be more than half English!" I was irresistibly impelled to exclaim at length.

She looked round quickly and smiled. "Only half," she answered; "my mother was Italian. Any objection?"

"None whatever to the result," I assured her. "What I object to, or rather deplore, is the sad waste of it. You see, I have undertaken to surmount that huddled knot of ungainly warriors with a representation of Victory, and your head and shoulders tantalise me to such a degree——"

"Oh, but don't be tantalised," she interrupted, without the slightest hesitation or self-consciousness; "borrow them by all means. My name happens to be Vittoria, so nothing could be more appropriate. When shall I give you a sitting?"

She was like that. It is not possible for a beautiful girl to be unaware of her beauty; but Miss Torrance, I fancy, set little store by hers, except in so far as it might serve to earn her the interest or affection of her fellow-creatures. She set a good deal of store by them, I afterwards found.

"It would be only just the head and shoulders," I observed apologetically.

"They're yours!" cried my young lady, with a gesture of fine liberality.

I may mention here that she was as good as her word, and that the plaster cast of a lightly-draped female figure, bearing the legend Vittoria Victrix, adorns my studio today. A different image in bronze braves the mists and smoke of the Midland city. One has fastidious, and doubtless absurd, compunctions which it is not worth while to analyse or specify. Moreover, Miss Torrance's victories were not of the warlike order which I was commissioned to symbolise, nor had her features much in common with those of the stern daughter of Pallas and Styx.

Now, since Lydia, being discretion's self, would never dream of invading my studio unannounced, I might, I daresay, have had a dozen visitors far more compromising than this charming child (who, viewed in the cold light of common sense, could not be compromising at all) without my sister's being any the wiser; but I am as inapt at making mysteries as she is adroit in probing them; so I judged it best to tell her as much as I knew respecting the fair stranger that same evening, and she exclaimed, as I knew she would, that she had never heard of such a thing in her life.

"My dear Edwin, what can you have been think-

ing about ! And what can Mrs. Adare have been thinking about ! ”

“Mrs. Adare,” I answered, “has so many subjects to engross her thoughts that she may well have forgotten the prim conventionalities of a bygone epoch. However, she did remind me that it was bygone, and she further suggested, as an afterthought, that your presence during her niece’s lessons would be an ample sacrifice to the shade of the late Mrs. Grundy.”

“*Did* she ? Well, if the lady were not such a friend of yours I should venture to call that average cheek ! ”

“I was afraid it would strike you in that light,” I remarked. “Luckily, it is neither your business nor mine to provide Miss Torrance with a duenna, and I doubt whether she would thank us if we did.”

“So do I,” returned Lydia drily. “Pretty and free-and-easy, you say, with a sort of a talent which she has known how to make you believe in, against your better judgment. Oh, I can see the girl from here ! ”

“I must have described her very badly,” said I. “For the matter of that, perhaps she’s indescribable. Deign to drop in upon us one day while she is being instructed and find out for yourself how grotesquely wide of the mark your conception of her is.”

“No, thanks,” answered Lydia loftily ; “I can’t

say that I feel any curiosity upon the subject of your indescribable Miss Torrance. Besides, as you very well know, there is a standing order against intrusion during your working hours."

After that, it was no surprise to me to see my sister sail into the studio a day or two later, nor was I unprepared for the frankly hostile gaze which she brought to bear upon my pupil, who happened at the moment to be busy with an impressionist study of my features. (My features, I regret to say, lend themselves readily to that method of treatment.) But what did astonish me more than a little was Lydia's almost instantaneous subjugation. How it was brought about I can no more tell than she herself could. Subsequently, to be sure, she ascribed it to her own intuitive perceptions and to the power which she claims of reading other people's souls while she runs; but I suspect that in reality she yielded, like the rest of the world, to a fascination which she would have been puzzled to define. Honestly, I do not believe that Vittoria put forth any intentional effort to captivate a maiden lady whose first recognition of her was far from cordial. Why should she? When I came to know her better, I observed that her attitude towards strangers was always the same and was the direct opposite of the normal British attitude, which is, as we know, one of mute challenge. She had the air of being unaffectedly pleased at making their acquaintance and of taking it for granted that the pleasure

must be mutual. I should have thought that in this particular instance the assumption might prove over bold; but it did not. A quarter of an hour or thereabouts sufficed to relieve me of all apprehension and to lay the foundation of a friendship which has never since faltered or failed. At the end of that brief space of time my sister, with Joshua curled up on her knee, was listening benignly to a débutante's impressions of London society and punctuating with little outbursts of indulgent laughter the artless phrases in which some of these were imparted to her.

"It's such luck for me," the girl remarked, "to be taken round the show by Aunt Julia, for she knows it all as well as she knows her own pocket."

"And it amuses you?" Lydia asked.

"Beyond words! I hadn't the least idea of how amusing it was going to be. Don't you find it so yourself?"

Lydia shook her head. "I am not in it. My brother, of course, is; because he is a man of genius whom everybody is only too glad to meet, but I very seldom get invitations to great houses, and when I do, I decline them."

For an instant Vittoria's dancing eyes encountered those of the hapless man of genius and seemed to say, "Don't wriggle; be diverted, like me." That is, no doubt, the best standpoint to take up, and at public dinners and on other trying occasions it may be reached; but I am too keenly alive to the

pathos and bathos of my good Lydia's incidental utterances to laugh at them.

Pathos, I must say, had not thus far suggested itself to me in association with Miss Torrance, and the last pronouncement upon her that I should have expected to hear from my sister's lips was "There's something pathetic about the girl." It was, however, with those words that Lydia wound up a hearty and unreserved tribute to the winning ways of our departed guest. Vittoria, before she left, had been taken off to inspect the spring garden—always a mark of special favour—and had, I dare say, been subjected to some of those searching queries which would not be tolerated for a moment amongst men, but which few women appear either to omit or resent. Why she was pathetic I was unable to elicit from the observant Lydia, who said that was just what remained to be discovered; but in any case her conquest was an accomplished fact, and she was thenceforth free, not only of the studio but of our adjoining abode.

It was only a few days after this that my sister and I attended a dinner-party in Charles Street; although Lydia, as she had intimated, seldom or never goes to dinner-parties. This is due to a haughty disinclination on her part to be patronised and to a conviction, which nothing will shake, that she is only asked as an unwelcome appendage to her brother. Consequently, when she announced her intention of accepting the very short and in-

formal invitation conveyed to her on a postcard, I could not doubt that curiosity respecting Mrs. Adare's niece was her guiding motive. I myself felt that I should not be averse to hearing what my hostess had been in too great a hurry to tell me at our last meeting; so I made bold to remind her of her promise when I found myself seated beside her at the dinner-table.

I chanced to find myself in that honourable position because Mrs. Adare always sends her guests in to dinner, as she invites them, higgledy-piggledy. I imagine that, when in London, she asks people—any people of whom she happens to think—to dine with her on every disengaged evening, and the outcome usually is, as it was this time, a strange medley of peers, peeresses, newspaper editors, members of Parliament, artists and actresses.

"Oh, did I say I was going to tell you something?" she asked. "Well, really I don't know what there is to tell, except that Vittoria inevitably devolves upon me, since my brother won't give a thought to any subject under the sun but his health, which is perfectly sound, I believe. Don't think I'm complaining; I'm only too glad to have her, and the poor child couldn't be allowed to perish slowly of sheer inanition at Barholme. Still—there she is on my hands!"

"If that's all, she will very soon be off them," I ventured to predict.

Mrs. Adare shrugged her thin shoulders. She is a spare, wiry little woman, with bright eyes, untidy iron-grey hair and a parchment visage. I should have said by the look of her that she was in the habit of worrying herself a good deal if I had not ascertained that she never does. Like the rest of us, she has had, and has, her worries, but the agility with which she contrives to turn her back upon them is admirable and enviable.

"There's no knowing," she answered. "One hopes, of course; but—well, when all's said, the only plan is to wait and see what happens."

"Mr. Torrance," I observed, "must be a selfish sort of person." And, as this drew no rejoinder, I added tentatively, "Miss Torrance's mother was an Italian, I understand?"

"Was what?" asked Mrs. Adare, whose attention had wandered and who turned upon me with some slight show of irritation. "An Italian? Oh, yes, of course. That's pretty plainly to be seen, isn't it?"

She changed the subject, and I failed to get any further information out of her, though I made one or two subsequent attempts. Lydia, however, was more successful. No sooner had we started on our long homeward drive than she began—

"Didn't I tell you that there was something pathetic about the girl?"

"Well?" said I.

"Well, it's her father. I suspected as much from

the way her face clouded over when she mentioned him the other day, and now I'm sure. Did you notice the very nice-looking young man who sat beside her at dinner and who was so evidently in a state of abject adoration?"

"Yes," I replied; "he is Lord Ringstead, Lord St. Erth's eldest son. I can't say that I noticed his being in the condition you speak of."

"Everybody else did, then. Lord and Lady St. Erth are dead against the match; which looks odd, upon the face of it, because they are very badly off and Mr. Torrance, who has only the one child, is supposed to be rich."

"You appear to have kept your ears open," I remarked.

"I don't expose myself to the snubs of smart women and the open disdain of the man who takes me in to dinner for nothing. Now, the question is—what has he done?"

"The man who took you in to dinner?"

"Don't be silly, Edwin. Mr. Torrance, of course."

"Nothing, by Mrs. Adare's account, except nurse imaginary ailments," I answered. "I gather that he is a cypher."

"Much more likely to be a swindler, or to have strangled his wife," Lydia declared. "Depend upon it, there's a screw loose with him somewhere, and all those people know there is."

"Let us hope not," said I sleepily.

I was interested in Vittoria, but not very much in Mr. Torrance, nor in Lord Ringstead, a well-groomed, good-humoured youth whom I could not think in any respect worthy of the high destiny allotted to him by my sister. So, although I believe a good deal more was said, I was unable to recall any of it the next morning.

CHAPTER III

"HONESTLY now," said Vittoria, "do you think I shall ever be any use at this game?"

After many attendances at the studio, she had been receiving the first serious instruction that I had given her, and perhaps she was a little discouraged, as clever learners are apt to be, when the futility of mere cleverness begins to dawn upon them.

"Well, no," I answered. "If I am to be honest, I don't think you ever will. You see, it isn't a game, and, supposing it were, you still couldn't hope to play it respectably without going through a rather long period of drudgery."

"For which there won't be time?"

"For which there won't be time. How can there be when your days and nights are getting more and more crowded up with social engagements, and when you are visibly sleepy at eleven o'clock in the morning?"

"You aren't in a very good humour today, are you?" asked Vittoria.

"Not very," I confessed. "It's the combination of what you possess and what you lack that vexes the professional soul. You won't or can't, arrive

at technical excellence; so why should you have been granted talent and imagination, while I must plod heavily along with neither?"

"Most people would tell you that you had plenty of both," observed Vittoria; "but cheer up, anyhow. We'll pool our respective gifts and amaze the world. Mine shall be the ideas and yours the perfect execution of them."

"That kind offer," I ungratefully remarked, "only shows how far you are from understanding what I mean. Abstract imagination is a barren thing; to be of any value it has to find expression in the act of workmanship."

"In other words, I'm no credit to you as a pupil and no use as a collaborator. Oh, but this is grave! Joshua, dear boy, it's grave! It sounds very much as if you and I were going to be politely warned off the premises."

I made haste to assure her that no such act of discourtesy was in contemplation, and she said she was glad of that. "Because, you know, I don't want to be dismissed. I plead guilty to loving London life, but I'm not certain that I don't still more love coming up here, high above all the fuss and bustle, and talking to you and dear old Lydia."

"Do you," I wonderingly inquired, "call her 'dear old Lydia' to her face?"

"I believe I have. I'm sure she wouldn't mind if I did. She is awfully good to me, and so are you,

when you aren't cross. And I really think you rather like having me here, even though it is such a waste of time."

"I like it so much," I answered, laughing, "that I believe my mild melancholy, which you so mistakenly call crossness, means nothing more nor less than a foreboding that you are bound to forsake us sooner or later. That's why I try to pique you into perseverance by saying rude things."

She shook her head. "No; you say them because they are true. You know very well that you will never make a sculptress of me."

I certainly did know that; yet I could assert without any violation of truth that my tuition, so long as she cared to avail herself of it, would tend to increase her technical aptitude. "Besides," I went on, "you must remember that you're indispensable to me just now as a model."

"One is proud to be told that one is indispensable. All the same, you had better not say so to my father when he calls; he might make it a reason for requesting you to dispense with me."

"Is your father in London, then?" I asked.

"Yes, he has come up for a week, and at dinner last night he suddenly expressed a wish to see you. Which gave me rather a shock."

"Why?" I inquired. "Did you think that the sight of me would be likely to give him a shock?"

"It's so impossible to say! When you rumple your hair and hump up your shoulders and scowl,

one feels that you must be as harmless as if you were seventy. But then again, you can look quite nice and young when you please—or rather, when you are pleased.”

“Upon the first sign of Mr. Torrance’s approach I’ll make myself look downright repulsive,” said I, divining the nature of the risk at which she hinted; “nothing will be easier. Is he—er—a very alarming person?”

“Not exactly alarming,” answered the girl hesitatingly, “only a little unaccountable sometimes. Don’t imagine him a stern parent; he is most indulgent in some ways. Generally speaking, he lets me do just as I like; but every now and then he takes my breath away by angrily forbidding something of which I should never have expected him to take any notice. Last winter, for instance, when he heard that I was to have a part in an amateur play at the Lincoln Theatre for the benefit of local charities, he was furious, and I was packed off to Aunt Julia at a moment’s notice. He said no decent woman would exhibit herself upon a public stage, although several of the most irreproachable ladies in the county were going to act. So that shows you!”

It showed me that Vittoria had not reduced her father to subjection and that she was perplexed by a phenomenon which was doubtless unique in her experience. But she evidently did not wish to discuss him at greater length, and as I myself was

now under pretty complete subjection, I acquiesced in the return to work which she ordained.

She had said enough to make me look forward to Mr. Torrance's visit with some apprehension. Living down in Lincolnshire, he would hardly have become imbued with his sister's modern ideas; and, indeed, if his were reactionary, my own were likely to be in unwilling agreement with them. Everything leads me to believe that if I had a grown-up daughter, I might object to her spending frequent hours, unattended, in the studio of a male instructor, even were he as plain-headed and negligible as Edwin Trathan, R.A. This is perhaps as appropriate a place as another for me to mention that in the matter of personal appearance I do not shine. According to the photographers and the looking-glass, I am a gaunt man, with a slight stoop, a rather prominent nose, straight hair and lantern jaws, which have been displayed in all their angularity of outline since Lydia persuaded me to remove a ragged beard. I incline to the hope that my countenance is at times irradiated and ennobled by an expression of much benevolence; but as to this I cannot speak from personal observation, for photographers exasperate me and I am never at my best while shaving or battling with a recalcitrant white tie. It is customary to assert that beauty in a man is of little or no consequence; but I have never held that opinion myself, nor do I see how it can be reconciled with divers well-ascertained

facts. However, since one must accept the humiliations of uncomeliness, one may as well claim its prerogatives, and I could but trust that after Mr. Torrance should have beheld me, insistence upon these would be superfluous.

What I expected him to be like I don't remember. Certainly not the little sandy-haired, dandified, undefinably ludicrous elderly gentleman that he turned out to be. His daughter brought him to the studio on the following day, and before he had opened his lips I perceived that, whatever else he might or might not be, he was an ass. When he did open them, it was to emit a confirmatory bray.

"I must introduce myself, Mr. Trathan," he began, strutting up to me and extending a small, moist hand, while he screwed an eyeglass into position, "as one of your admirers. What I always say of your work is that it is conscientious. It may not be what I call arresting; it may show little attempt to break with received traditions; but it is invariably painstaking, and it never, I think, falls below a certain level."

One must indeed be a prize donkey to introduce oneself with such a speech as that! Moreover, what need was there for him to introduce himself at all, seeing that his daughter was present to perform the required ceremony? But throughout an interview which did not last long he behaved very much as if his daughter had not been present. He ignored one or two timid observations of hers; he

completely ignored the professional relation in which I stood to her; only because he could not well help it did he notice my remark that she had pronounced artistic abilities.

"Indeed?" said he coldly. "I was not aware that Vittoria possessed anything more than a very ordinary talent. Some artistic sense she would probably inherit; for I have been a cultivator and, in my modest way, a patron of the arts all my life."

To judge by his ensuing monologue, he had cultivated them to singularly little purpose, while his criticisms upon the works of art contained in my studio were more suggestive of patronage than modesty. In the intervals of passing them in review he related how well he had been acquainted with the most famous artists, British and foreign, of a past generation, and gave it to be understood that they had one and all been wont to hang eagerly upon his words. Of late years impaired health had compelled him to live in retirement. He suffered, he was sorry to tell me, from valvular disease of the heart, and was, in fact, now in London for the purpose of being overhauled by the chief authority on such complaints. Then I had to hear what he had said to the specialist about Nauheim, and what the specialist had said to him; the implication being that no man's subject was so thoroughly his own but that he might learn something new respecting it from Mr. Torrance. An absurd, self-centred little

windbag—null, it seemed to me, from every point of view, save in his paternal character. His incapacity to appreciate his daughter would not have been so strange, for he was obviously made up of incapacities; but that he should actively dislike her was past understanding. And dislike her he did. Active, irritated dislike was visible in the furtive glances that he threw at her, in his marked exclusion of her from a colloquy which he virtually monopolised, above all in his curiously ungracious method of declining her proffered company when he took his leave.

"I thought Mr. Trathan was to give you a lesson," said he. "I don't know for what other object you came here."

For what object he himself had come remained obscure; but at any rate, he had adumbrated no interference with existing arrangements; so we were that much to the good. Something to the above effect I said, as soon as he had left; and Vittoria, who seemed a little depressed, agreed; and then I think we both felt that there was nothing more to be said about him.

Joshua stretched himself and looked up at me, laughing in a silent, canine fashion. "Did you ever?" he seemed to ask. "And that—I'll trouble you!—is the man who snubs my mistress and despises me as a cur. Well, well!"

Sketching Mr. Torrance afterwards, both verbally and with a pencil, for my sister's benefit, I

pointed out that her theory concerning him would not hold water; but Lydia clings to her theories with feminine tenacity.

"I don't see that at all," was her rejoinder. "You contend that he is too great a fool to be a knave; but isn't it notorious that the majority of criminals are mentally deficient? And unless there is something amiss with him, there must be something amiss with the girl herself. Which I'm sure you won't allow."

Of course not; yet it soon became evident to me that there was something not entirely normal or satisfactory in her social situation. Slight as is my intercourse with the gay world and little as I know or care about its sayings and doings, I am at certain seasons of the year brought perforce into contact with many persons who belong to it, and although I heard nothing but admiring eulogy of Vittoria from these, I could not help noticing that she was spoken of as "poor girl" or "poor child" more frequently than circumstances appeared to warrant. Then there occurred an incident, trivial enough in itself, yet which, coming on the top of other trivialities too numerous to specify, struck me as significant.

I was at that time engaged upon the equestrian statue of a gracious Prince who carried graciousness so far as to honour me with sittings which must, I fear, have bored him to death. Arrayed in full-dress uniform and perched astride upon a

dummy charger, his Royal Highness was pleased to discuss the topics of the day affably while I worked, and thus it came to pass that he made incidental allusion to Miss Torrance as being, he had heard, a student of the plastic art under my tutelage. (The number of things that these great people hear about comparatively little people, and the interest that they take in them, always astonishes me.) A niece of Mrs. Adare's, was she not? And quite out-of-the-way pretty and attractive. All the young fellows losing their hearts to her—so he had been told. Did I consider her promising? But of course she would not be taking up sculpture as a profession. An orphan, he supposed? Oh, there was an invalid father, was there? Why did nobody ever see him?

I gratified my illustrious interrogator's curiosity as well as I could until a pause supervened. Then he said, speaking gently and deliberately, with little breaks between his words—

"I think that young ladies who go out—a great deal—into society in London—should be presented at Court."

It really sounded very much like a rebuke. Yet, if a prescribed formality had been neglected in Miss Torrance's case, it was clear that no blame for the omission could lie at my door. Almost equally clear was it that I was meant to convey to the responsible quarter what had been said with such emphasis, and I was only withheld from under-

taking to do so by an impression that in the presence of Royalty one is not supposed to volunteer statements. I therefore held my tongue and looked unhappy; which was, I trust, the correct course to adopt.

CHAPTER IV

I AM not, as a rule, very fond of meddling with other people's business; still, it seemed only friendly to let Mrs. Adare know that she had been guilty of a solecism which had not escaped exalted comment; so as I happened to be near Berkeley Square between one and two o'clock the next day, I thought I might as well inquire whether she was at home or not. She dashed up to her door in an electric brougham and a great hurry just after I had rung the bell.

"Oh, is that you?" said she. "You've come to lunch, I hope? We're a little late, but never mind; I daresay there will be some sort of tepid food left for us."

Not until she had consulted the clock in the hall did she realise that it was only half-past one, instead of half-past two, as she had supposed, and her first impulse was to dart off again upon one of the numberless errands which her days are too full to hold. However, she thought better of this, and decided in favour of a "rest and a talk." She always enjoyed a talk with me, she was so kind as to add.

But she did not in the least enjoy my faithful

reproduction of his Royal Highness's words and mien. Her raised eyebrows disappeared beneath her grizzled fringe, the fine network of lines which gave her cheeks something of the appearance of a melon-rind became accentuated, and she flung out a pair of skinny hands despairingly.

"Oh, *how* disagreeable of him!" she exclaimed. "Did he say that you were to tell me?"

"He didn't actually say so," I replied, "but I gathered that that was what he wished me to do. After all, I suppose it's usual for *débutantes* to be presented, isn't it?"

Mrs. Adare's tongue gave an impatient little click against her teeth. "Of course it's usual, but—well, Vittoria isn't exactly a formal *débutante*, you see. She comes to stay with me, and I'm delighted to have her, and, being here, she naturally has to meet my friends. I can't keep her locked up in her bedroom, can I?"

"I shouldn't think so," said I.

"In short, it's all my brother's fault. One never can get him to say definitely what he wants or intends. One acts for the best; what more can one do? Really it's hardly fair to place me in such an equivocal position!"

Tears of mortification dimmed her bright little eyes, and I could not help feeling sorry for her, because I take it that Mrs. Adare does not weep easily. Everything has to be regarded in its relation to other things. For my own part, deeply as

I should lament having acted in a way to incur or deserve the displeasure of my Sovereign, I don't think I should cry about it; but no doubt there are sections of the community in which such a misfortune is looked upon as cardinal. So I tried to comfort my distressed friend.

"Perhaps," I said, "I am making more of this than I was meant to do; perhaps the Prince only wished to give a kindly hint. And there's still time to act upon it, isn't there?"

Mrs. Adare shook her head. "Hardly this year; unless one were to apply at the Lord Chamberlain's Office for a special favour, which is the last thing I should like to do. It's all so very tiresome and unfortunate!"

She concluded, after a pause and a long sigh, "I must have it out with Felix, I suppose."

The prospect of "having it out" with her brother was one which she manifestly did not relish; and his entrance as soon as the words were out of her mouth drew a quickly repressed ejaculation of dismay from her. But Mr. Torrance, who seemed to be in a state of some perturbation, probably did not notice that. Nor did he take any notice of my presence.

"As I had to pass your door, Julia," he began, "I looked in for a moment to say good-bye. Last night, I had an alarming attack, and although Sir William, whom I have just been consulting, rather absurdly and ignorantly sets it down to indigestion,

he agrees with me that I ought to go to Nauheim as soon as possible. It is inconvenient, but there is no help for it."

"Both inconvenient and needless, I should say," remarked Mrs. Adare unsympathisingly. She muttered something about "a pinch of bicarbonate of soda" and then asked, "How long do you expect to be away?"

Mr. Torrance was not in a position to name dates. Much must depend upon his power to go through an unbroken course of treatment. On previous occasions he had derived benefit from a quiet sojourn in Switzerland after Nauheim, and he rather thought of repeating that experiment, subject to the doctor's approval. Upon the whole, he was likely to be abroad for at least two months.

"And what becomes of Vittoria?" his sister inquired.

"Vittoria can go home at any time that you and she may think fit. She will find everything in readiness for her there."

"Is she to stay down at Barholme all by herself, then?"

"Really, my dear Julia," remonstrated Mr. Torrance fretfully, "I must not be blamed if considerations of health compel me to leave home. I understood that you were kindly anxious to keep Vittoria with you for some time longer."

"So I am," Mrs. Adare returned; "only——" She paused irresolutely; then, with the air of one

who takes a courageous header, "The truth is, Felix," said she, "that you're too casual for words! I ask nothing better than to have the dear girl with me and give her what amusement I can; but I ought to have some sort of instructions, and I get absolutely none!"

Mr. Torrance professed implicit confidence in his sister's judgment and discretion. "Whatever you think right and suitable, Julia! I am neither experienced enough in social matters to dictate to you nor well enough to discuss them with you."

"All very fine," Mrs. Adare retorted, "but I must be told how to act. Do you wish Vittoria to be introduced into society like other girls or don't you? That's what it comes to, and Mr. Trathan has just been giving me a particularly annoying proof of the impossibility of leaving such questions open."

At the mention of my name Mr. Torrance for the first time became aware of my identity. Extending his clammy little paw, he apologised for not having recognised me sooner. "But my sister has so many acquaintances who are not known to me, and my present wretched state of health makes me unobservant."

His wretched health (I must say that he was a bad colour and seemed exhausted) was likewise the excuse that he put forward for receiving the report of Royal censure with an indifference which was perceptibly unfeigned.

"It seems to me, Julia," said he, "that all this is more your affair than mine. At any rate, I am much too ill to be worried with it. I don't wish to alarm you about my condition——"

"You don't alarm me a bit," his sister interrupted. "I am convinced that you will attend my funeral, unless it rains, and I don't expect to die yet awhile."

"I was about to say," Mr. Torrance resumed, "that although I do not wish to alarm you about my condition, I am well aware that it is precarious, and Sir William insists above all things upon my being spared worry. As regards this presentation business, I am sorry if a mistake has been made; but clearly you are answerable for it, not I."

"Then, Felix, am I to understand that you wish Vittoria to be presented?" Mrs. Adare asked, in a tone of vexed surprise.

Really Mr. Torrance had no wish about it, one way or the other. Julia must do as she thought best. He spoke as though this singular detachment of his had been a matter of course; he simply did not want to be bothered with his daughter, and saw no reason why he should be. It appeared, too, that he did not even feel called upon to bid her good-bye; for, on hearing that people were expected to luncheon, he said at once that he was unequal to the strain of facing mobs, and so took himself off.

Mrs. Adare turned to me with an eloquent ges-

ture. "Now, what is one to do with a man like that?"

"I know what I should do with him," I answered; "I should insist upon his ceasing to shirk his natural duties."

"My dear friend, you might as well say that you would insist upon making your watch go after the mainspring had been broken! Felix is invulnerable. One can't appeal to his paternal feelings or his heart or his conscience, because he hasn't got any of those things. I verily believe that he isn't conscious of possessing anything except an infinitely precious body. Well, I suppose we had better go and eat."

I followed her upstairs to the drawingroom, where we found quite a large number of persons who had probably been waiting some little time for their hostess. Vittoria, in a riding-habit, was talking to Lord Ringstead, who wore breeches and long boots. They had, I presumed, just returned from some joint expedition on horseback, and certainly they had a good deal the appearance of being an engaged couple. I recognised no other faces, save that of Lady St. Erth, the young man's mother, which exhibited its usual expression of cold severity. Lady St. Erth does not always know me; but she was pleased to do so now, and even to draw her skirt slightly aside, as an intimation that I might seat myself upon the ottoman of which she was the solitary, rigid occupant. She said—

"I have been here more than a quarter of an hour, though I purposely came late, knowing the ways of the house. Julia Adare is the most casual woman I have ever met."

"Perhaps it's a family failing," I remarked. "At any rate, I have just heard her apply the same adjective to her brother."

Lady St. Erth's interest seemed to be aroused. "Her brother?" she repeated. "I thought he avoided London like the plague."

"I don't know," I answered, "whether he thinks he is in danger of contracting the plague here, but he appears to have decided that this air is not good for valvular disease of the heart, so he is off to Nauheim tomorrow morning."

"Heart disease?" asked Lady St. Erth, quickly. "Do you mean that he is seriously ill, then?"

"He says so," I replied, "and I shouldn't wonder if it was true; though Mrs. Adare would probably tell you that there is nothing wrong with him. My own impression is that the man is really rather bad, but that he finds his bad health a convenience."

Lady St. Erth was not listening. Her hard blue eyes had strayed to her son and his companion, and while she surveyed the pair with a contracted brow, she seemed to be engaged upon some mental problem. She is a stiff, handsome, rather forbidding personage, of a type fast tending towards extinction. One values these old women for the sake of their white hair, their upright carriage, their main-

tenance of fading traditions and a certain atmosphere of austere dignity and virtue which exhales from them; but I should not care to live with Lady St. Erth, and I can believe that there are times when meek, untidy Lord St. Erth regrets being under that necessity. His lordship's Cornish property used to yield tin or china clay or some other remunerative product of which the supply has unhappily given out. He has a large and doubtless expensive family. It was easy to conjecture that Lady St. Erth was anxious to marry her eldest son to an heiress; easy also to perceive that even in that capacity Vittoria would not be wholly acceptable to her. I suppose she knew that Mr. Torrance was well off, and everybody knows what a diseased heart must imply. Possibly she knew something else about him or his daughter or both of them which gave her pause.

Presently Vittoria caught my eye, and, leaving young Ringstead, she crossed the room to speak to me. She was beginning to give me her impressions of equestrian exercise in the streets of London when Lady St. Erth struck in suddenly and rather harshly with—

“Your father is leaving for Germany tomorrow morning, Mr. Trathan tells me. He doesn't take you with him, I suppose?”

Vittoria glanced interrogatively at me, and of course I had to explain. I was angry with Lady St. Erth and sorry for the girl, who had flushed a

little. It could not but be mortifying to her that her father should decamp without so much as troubling himself to leave her a message, and she evidently felt it so; but I daresay I showed some want of tact by advancing excuses on his behalf and laying stress on the alleged imperative orders of the doctor.

"Oh, that's always my father's way," said Vittoria, laughing. "Aunt Julia and I are quite accustomed to his abrupt appearances and vanishings."

Then she turned to my neighbour and did what I really do not believe anybody else in the world would have ventured to do. Lady St. Erth dresses in a peculiar style which my masculine ignorance will not allow me to describe, and as to which I had better say no more than that it is distinctly antiquated, that it is picturesque and that old Mechlin lace (I do know Mechlin lace when I see it) usually forms one of its constituent features. It was upon this lace that Vittoria now laid deft, appreciative fingers, smoothing it out, readjusting it, and finally changing the position of a small diamond brooch.

"There!" she said, falling back a pace and contemplating results approvingly, "now you're perfect! Now you're the most beautiful thing in the room!"

Her acquaintance with an old woman who inspires universal awe must have been recent and

slight. Only Vittoria Torrance would have dreamt of taking such a liberty, and it may well be that in recording the incident I make it appear like a piece of sheer impertinence. The best proof I can adduce of its having been in reality nothing of the sort is that Lady St. Erth did not so regard it. Her stern face softened, and she smiled very kindly and pleasantly as she returned—

“My dear, so long as you are in the room, you will be the only person present to think that. But it is pretty of you to detect remains of beauty in me and my ancient rags. I am sorry——”

She did not proceed to tell us what caused her sorrow; but I fancied that I could fill up the blank. I fancied that if she had given utterance to the thought that was in her mind, she would have said, “I am sorry you won’t do.”

But perhaps, in spite of all, Vittoria might be made to do? Immediately after this we trooped down to the diningroom, and, as we descended the staircase, I noticed that Lady St. Erth’s hand rested upon the girl’s arm.

CHAPTER V

"WHAT you tell me," observed my sister, "only strengthens my conviction that Mr. Torrance's history wouldn't bear looking into."

We were sitting in our small garden after dinner, as is our custom on summer evenings, and I had just rendered a detailed account of the day's events, that being likewise a custom which I am seldom allowed to evade.

"I should have thought," I answered, "that if anything stood out from what I have told you in higher relief than the fact that there is a screw loose somewhere, it would be the culpable innocence of Mr. Torrance. He is perfectly willing that his daughter should be presented; he knows of no reason—although both Mrs. Adare and Lady St. Erth evidently do—why she shouldn't be."

"He knows well enough!" Lydia affirmed positively. "He prefers to let other people bear his burdens for him, that's all. How do you account for his taking to his heels as soon as it begins to be noticed that he is in London? Not for one moment do I believe in his diseased heart, you know. I wonder whether Vittoria herself is in the secret or not!"

"I am sure she isn't," I replied, "and I do hope you won't suggest to her that there is one."

"Am I," demanded Lydia, "a mischief-maker or a scandalmonger or a natural born idiot?"

My sister, I can confidently assert, is none of those things; only—well, perhaps her sex debars her from assuming that standpoint of friendly neutrality which comes easily enough to mine. Lydia would doubtless declare that to be at once friendly and neutral is a contradiction in terms; and she had become very friendly indeed with Vittoria. In fact, it was more and more brought home to me, as the days went by, that my pupil was beginning to prefer my house to my studio. At any rate, she showed an increasing disposition to curtail her brief spells of study and to flit across the garden to the cool morning-room where sympathy and caresses awaited her. It may be that she did not find me over and above sympathetic just then. She was neither making progress nor attempting to make any in the art of modelling; my reproduction of her head and shoulders had been completed; very likely she took some growls and grumbles of mine more literally than I meant her to take them, and chose to assume that she was no longer wanted. That she resented my compulsory lack of hospitality towards young Ringstead I do not think; she must have seen that I had no choice in that matter. It was all very well for him to drop in by chance once or twice while she

was at work; he was a pleasant-mannered youth, and I had no personal objection to his looking me up, even if his pretence of interest in sculpture was a trifle thin. But I was obliged at last to tell him plainly that I could not allow my studio to be utilised as a place of assignation, and I am bound to say that he took the rebuff quite good-humouredly.

"That's all right, old chap, that's all right," said he (I was "old chap" in something less than a week, I think); "of course I see what you mean. But I suppose you won't forbid my just stepping across to give Miss Trathan some cuttings that I've got her from our place down in Cornwall."

Those cuttings, I suspect, had relays of successors which were delivered to Miss Trathan without the preliminary process of "stepping across" from the studio. Perhaps Ringstead sometimes happened to be in the morning-room when Miss Torrance appeared at the open window to greet her friend. I have already said that neutrality lies outside my sister's compass, and I hardly see what more I could have done in vindication of my own than I did by declining to countenance a scheme which struck me as neither promising nor altogether straightforward.

A new factor was introduced into the little drama from which I stood impartially, if apprehensively, aloof on that hot summer forenoon when Mr. Franklin Garforth's card was brought to me. I

was glad to welcome this opulent American, who had not only been a purchaser of certain works of mine but whom I personally liked by reason of his accurate appreciation of contemporary art. How he had contrived to acquire it I cannot say; for he was not yet middle-aged—five or six and thirty, perhaps—and his life had been a busy one; but he was a man who had known how to acquire many things, in addition to an enormous fortune. His New York mansion, I had heard, was a veritable mine of well-selected treasures. As he requested me to let him see what I had been about since our last meeting, a twelvemonth or so before, I pointed to my group of combatant patriots, and, after prowling round it and silently scrutinising its details with the eye of an expert, he opined that it would not “hurt my reputation any.” But when I showed him the clay figure of Vittoria Victrix, which was not destined to surmount it, his approbation was much more warmly expressed. He pushed his hands deep down into his pockets, thrust his long chin forward and nodded emphatically three times before he asked—

“Do you know, Trathan, that that’s just about the finest thing you’ve ever done in your life?”

“I have done nothing fine in my life,” I answered; “but I know, and so do you, that I have done better work than that. If you mean, as you probably do, that I have never before had the luck to come across a human being with such a head

and neck as you are staring at, I won't contradict you."

"Maybe that's what I mean," Garforth admitted reflectively. "Who the devil is she, anyway?"

He listened with attention to my condensed account of Miss Torrance and remarked that, unless I had idealised her, it was hard to explain her being still Miss Anybody. "Why," he inquired, "isn't she a duchess?"

"Possibly because she isn't an American," I replied. I don't know what made me add "There may be other reasons," except that I have a stupid, careless habit of translating my thoughts into words.

However, Garforth did not get much more out of me, though he put various direct questions while he fixed me with those light-grey, penetrating eyes of his. Garforth is not good-looking. He has dust-coloured hair, prominent cheek-bones and the lined, desiccated skin which climate, strained existence and over-heated dwellings combine to inflict upon so many of his countrymen. But he has, as very successful men often have, a certain indescribable distinction of bearing. If he has not married a duchess or a duke's daughter, it is perhaps because ambition with him has not shaped that way. He knows all manner of high notabilities, and it is needless to say that he knows Mrs. Adare. He congratulated himself upon this latter circumstance; for——

"I tell you," was his conclusion, "I've got to be presented to your young lady."

He did not, as it turned out, have to go as far as Charles Street for the fulfilment of a legitimate aspiration. The luncheon hour being at hand, he accepted my offer of modest refreshment, and when we had walked over to the house together, we found that Miss Torrance and Lord Ringstead were already there upon the same errand as ourselves. I do not always put in an appearance at luncheon, nor does my sister always inform me when she happens to have company at that repast. Reluctance to disturb me at my work had restrained her from doing so on this occasion, she hastened to declare, and I did not omit to thank her for her thoughtfulness.

"Of course," I observed, "if I had known who was here, I should have stayed where I was and sent across for sandwiches; but now that Mr. Garforth and I are fully committed, we can but make the best of it."

"One word more," said Vittoria warningly, "and out you go! Sandwiches shall follow in a few minutes."

She may or may not have been aware that these encounters of hers with Ringstead under my roof were the reverse of agreeable to me; but it is certain that she was not in the least confused or ashamed at being caught. Vittoria was a law unto herself; and indeed she could hardly be blamed for that,

seeing that there had never, so far as I could make out, been anybody else to lay down laws or rules for her guidance. Nor, of course, could she fairly be blamed for bestowing very little further notice upon her host. Ringstead seated himself beside her when we took our places at the oval luncheon-table, and, while maintaining a brisk conversation with him upon social episodes of which I had no knowledge, she gave me an opportunity of admiring once more the exquisite contour of her neck and shoulder. I could always contemplate that with admiration; I don't say that I was equally able to admire or welcome the subtle change in her which contact with the gay world was bound to effect sooner or later. We all partake of the nature of the chameleon; we can't help being influenced by our environment, imitating our neighbours, assimilating their little tricks of language and gesture. One is not so silly as to gird at inevitable developments; yet one may sometimes be permitted to regret them, and I paid the tribute of a subdued sigh to my vanishing Vittoria—so perceptibly on the highroad to become a smart lady like another.

Ringstead, I am sure, found nothing to regret or criticise in her. His eyes proclaimed undying devotion; his lips conveyed the same assurance through the transparent medium of commonplaces, and there was really no need for him to drop his voice occasionally to a whisper, since my sister, who was sitting on the other side of him, was

giving her entire attention to the stranger. Joshua and I divided the part of odd man out between us, enlivening it from time to time by an interchange of glances. Joshua, a dog of much discrimination, had, I noticed, conceived a liking for the American which was not in the least to be accounted for by the surreptitious transfer of a cutlet-bone from that gentleman's plate to his jaws. An instinctive sympathy perhaps; for Joshua's habitual attitude of reserved toleration towards the world at large was not unlike that of Garforth, who was usually silent in society, and I doubt whether the affection or esteem of either of them could be won by bribes. Anyhow, Joshua went so far as to rest his forepaws and chin upon Garforth's knee, while the latter, for some reason or other, made himself very agreeable to Lydia. He could make himself very agreeable indeed when he liked. He had travelled all over the world; he had met and talked with innumerable interesting persons, from Emperors to Anarchists; no aspect of the general human comedy came amiss to him, and he brought an unprejudiced, receptive sort of mind to bear upon it. I heard Lydia telling him that she, for her part, never went anywhere or saw anybody; to which he rejoined—

"So much the worse for everybody, if I may be allowed to say so. But your brother doesn't shut himself up. I ran up against him at quite a number of functions over here in London last year."

"That's another thing," Lydia proudly returned.

"Edwin would like to shut himself up; but he can't. Edwin, you must remember, is a great man."

And the unsmiling air of meditative respect with which Garforth answered "That's so," showed me that he had taken my good sister's measure.

He likes, I fancy, to take everybody's measure, and is probably rather good at the operation. Ringstead, legible as an open book with nice large print, would not detain him long; but Vittoria would clearly repay study, and I saw that he was making her the subject of a close and unremitting one during luncheon, although he never addressed a word to her until the meal was over. Only when we had all adjourned to the shade of our one shade-giving tree in the garden, and when he had lighted a big cigar (he does not smoke cigarettes), did he take quick possession of the wicker chair next to Vittoria's which Ringstead had momentarily vacated and open fire with—

"I've been looking at Mr. Trathan's effigy of you, Miss Torrance. It's worthy of the original, and I can't give it higher praise than that."

"Thank you very much," she answered, with a slightly surprised laugh.

He gravely corrected her. "I wasn't paying you a compliment; I shouldn't presume so far. I was merely venturing to compliment our friend. And I don't know when I've seen a man look less grateful."

I don't know when I have seen a man look less

pleased than the evicted Ringstead. As for me, I have often been assured by those better qualified to judge than I am that I own a speaking countenance, and I daresay it did not proclaim gratification at that moment. The truth is that I had an immediate intuition of what was going to happen. I will not attempt to account for or explain a mental forecast which was fully justified in the sequel; all I have to say is that I saw how powerfully Garforth was attracted by Vittoria, that I saw how bent he was upon attracting her, and that I had little doubt of his success. For he is a persistent, masterful man who seldom or never fails in any enterprise to which he sets his hand. He made a highly successful start, at all events, and in a very few minutes Vittoria seemed to have forgotten that there was anybody in her neighbourhood except the oddly fascinating person who sat beside her, nursing his knee and discoursing in low, leisurely accents. As far as I could hear, he was discoursing about art, though he may have introduced other topics into a monologue which caused her eyes to shine and her curved lips to part in an appreciative smile.

All this, I quite admit, was none of my business. So far as I was concerned, there was no reason in the world why Miss Torrance should not be fascinated by an American gentleman of wealth and integrity, except indeed that he was nearly twice her age; so a premonition that little good was likely to come of it must be my sole excuse for having

complained irritably of the muddiness of the coffee. Ringstead, on the other hand, had good cause to be as annoyed and angry as he manifestly was. He replied at random to Lydia's conciliatory remarks, he snubbed me in a style to which I am not accustomed, and finally, after several frustrated endeavours to strike into the conversation of the other couple, jumped up and took his leave in a huff. As it was clear that Garforth was not thinking of following his lead, I made no apology for returning to the studio. My guests, I thought, would not wish to detain a busy man in enforced idleness while they sat with their backs turned towards him, nor in truth was any such desire visible on their part.

It must have been nearly an hour later that Vittoria joined me, with the announcement that she had "come to make friends."

"I didn't know that there was any quarrel between us," I said.

"There isn't," she returned; "it takes two to make a quarrel, doesn't it? Let's be friends, all the same. Now scold me, if it will be any relief to you."

"Why should I scold you?" I asked. "There's a sort of relief, I confess, in telling you that you're a little disappointing; but I don't grumble. It's in the eternal, unalterable scheme of things that you should be. You can't help it."

"Really and truly I can't!" she declared. "If

you only knew the number of engagements that Aunt Julia makes for me ! ”

“In addition to those that you make for yourself. Yes, of course, art has to go to the wall, or at any rate wait for quieter times. What did you think of Garforth ? ”

“I think,” she answered reflectively, “I’m going to like him. Joshua took to him at once, which is always a good sign, and he gives one the idea of being strong and straight and shrewd. Yes, I think I’m going to like him.”

“I don’t think Ringstead is,” I remarked.

She laughed. “Lord Ringstead?—oh, no, I don’t suppose he is. But Lord Ringstead is such a very different sort of person, isn’t he ? ”

“Very,” I agreed drily. “I should doubt whether he and Garforth had more than one sentiment in common.”

Vittoria was silent for a few moments. Then—

“I believe you really do want to quarrel with me,” said she; “but I warn you that you’ll never manage it. All things considered, though, perhaps we’ll put off making friends until another day. So long ! ”

Thereupon she whistled to Joshua and left me to get on with my work.

CHAPTER VI

It did not take me long to perceive that I must have had the air of trying to pick a quarrel with Vittoria or to recognise that it had been both unmannerly and unjust of me to call her disappointing. What, in truth, had she done, save obey the natural instincts of her age and sex?—instincts harmless enough in themselves and void of all offence towards a disinterested bystander. I therefore resolved to seize the first opportunity of begging her pardon; and if opportunity was slow to present itself, that was no fault of mine, nor—as divers regretful postcards and telegrams informed me—of hers. I was assured that she did not want to give up her intermittent lessons, and she made more than one appointment with me; but always was compelled to cry off. Thus a considerable time elapsed without my seeing her; although Lydia, descending from our suburban heights with that end in view, had, I understood, better luck.

Upon Garforth I did happen several times, and it was at one of those annual quasi-public dinners which I am forced, sorely against my inclination, to attend that he made voluntary allusion to Miss Torrance. I was not surprised to hear that he had

pursued the acquaintance, nor was it difficult to guess that he had become a *persona gratissima* to Mrs. Adare in the character of a potential suitor for her niece's hand. What aunt or mother would not have been ready to welcome him and his millions in such a character? He was, however, pleased to discuss Vittoria with me from my own, perhaps rather more suitable, standpoint, as belonging to another generation than ours, and very likely he would have laughed me to scorn if I had suggested that he might be in love with her, though I felt pretty sure that he was. I tried him with a careless reference to Ringstead, and he rose to that fly at once.

"Lord Ringstead," said he, "is a typical specimen of your young British aristocracy. Well-groomed, good-natured, might fight splendidly and stupidly if there was any fighting on, and would be apt to get himself killed for want of knowing how to fight under modern conditions. That's all there is to him."

"It's a rather attractive type," I remarked.

"As a type, yes; as personified in a companion for life, scarcely. If you tell me that Miss Torrance is capable of being attracted by it, I don't believe you."

I said that she seemed to me to be so and that young people of both sexes were more liable to be attracted by a pleasing exterior than by intellectual endowments.

"My dear sir," returned Garforth in accents of calm decision, "Miss Torrance is not going to marry that animated vacuum. Such a thing can't be allowed."

"I am not at all sure that it will be," I observed. "Lady St. Erth's eyes, when I saw them last, had every appearance of forbidding it."

My neighbour dismissed Lady St. Erth with a forcible and uncomplimentary ejaculation.

"But I am offering her to you as an ally," I remonstrated.

"Well, I'm not taking her," Garforth returned. "I know the old woman. Six thousand a year would overrule any little prejudices of hers."

"Six thousand a year?" I echoed interrogatively.

"That's about the figure, according to Mrs. Adare. It isn't colossal; but it's more than the St. Erths can afford to reject, and Mr. Torrance is said to be a sick man. No; if I wanted allies, it isn't to Lord Ringstead's family that I should apply."

This was practically admitting that he proposed, with or without help, to defeat a project of marriage which he had pronounced inadmissible. Garforth was notoriously a philanthropic and kind-hearted man; but to suppose him actuated by purely unselfish motives in the special case would have been to pay a poor compliment to the equally notorious hardness of his head.

I don't mind owning that sheer curiosity and nothing else took me to the dance which Mrs. Adare gave shortly afterwards as a wind-up to her niece's London season. She had sent me a card out of civility or through inadvertence, I presume, for she did not conceal her astonishment when I made my bow to her.

"You, of all improbable people ! Have you taken to dancing, then, in your—your maturity ?"

"No," I answered. "I haven't matured up to that point yet; but I always like to keep an eye upon the development of my pupils, and one pupil of mine has been eluding scrutiny of late."

"Well, you won't have many more opportunities of scrutinising her, I'm afraid, for I'm taking her down to Capelhurst with me next week."

I said I should be sorry to lose her, but was glad to think that she was not to be dismissed to solitude in Lincolnshire; whereupon Mrs. Adare rejoined that of course there could be no question of that. She also told me that she had heard never a word from her brother since his departure, and she was beginning to say something about the injustice of visiting the sins of fathers upon children which might have been quite interesting and pertinent if she had been allowed to proceed; but other arriving guests elbowed me away from her, and the stream swept me on into the ball-room.

Mrs. Adare had a fine, big house, plenty of money, very little taste and no leisure. Such con-

ditions doubtless sufficed to account for her dance being as admirably done as I was assured on all hands that it was. She would, one guessed, simply give an order and leave the execution of it to the unfettered hands of the competent. Decorations, floor and music were all of high excellence, and there was not so great a crowd but that lookers-on could see something of the game. Soon I descried some of the players whom I was there to watch. Vittoria, in an exquisite "creation" of pale primrose hue, was dancing with Ringstead, while Lady St. Erth, in black velvet, was contemplating the pair from a bench of dowagers with a sort of austere compassion or compunction. Not far off, her husband was similarly engaged—a careworn, spectacled little man, who was tugging at his untrimmed beard and perhaps saying to himself (one could almost hear him saying it) that six thousand a year, after all, is six thousand a year. For Garforth's thick-set figure I scanned the ranks of dancers and spectators in vain.

In a few minutes the music ceased, and Vittoria, leaving the room on her partner's arm, hailed me with great vivacity. She said it was a revelation to behold me in such a novel setting and we must absolutely have a dance together.

"But I don't dance," I objected. "Besides, I don't believe you've got one left."

"These little things," she returned, "can always be arranged. You shall have the next, and we'll

sit it out, which will be much nicer. I want to have a talk with you."

The prospect of having a talk with her was entirely agreeable to me, and I think it must be acknowledged that in surrendering it, as I presently did, I displayed more self-sacrifice than could fairly be expected of anybody. Garforth, at all events, made handsome acknowledgment to that effect, and I trust that neither he nor Vittoria scented any underlying motive for my complaisance. Garforth, hurrying up the staircase just as we emerged from the ball-room, begged for a dance, was informed that his application came much too late, and looked so disappointed that I said—

"Oh, well! take mine. I'm a non-combatant, so I've no rights."

He may have given a liberal interpretation to my words and judged that they warranted him in accepting an offer for which, as I have said, he was properly grateful. Vittoria, for her part, vowed that she would neither throw me over nor be thrown over by me; but he looked at her in his compelling way and, with a half-reluctant laugh, she yielded. So away they went, while I reverted to my part of an intelligent observer. Being where I was with no other object than to observe, I should have been foolish to prevent the puppets from dancing for my edification.

Well, they danced together, and I observed them and was edified. I had never seen Garford dance

before, and I imagine that he had ceased to frequent ball-rooms; but, like many heavy men and most of his countrymen, he danced remarkably well. He kept perfect time, steered adroitly, had full control over his partner and did not get out of breath. I daresay Vittoria enjoyed her waltz with him; but I could not think that it was on account of his proficiency that she gave him the next one into the bargain. That next one apparently belonged of right to Ringstead, with whom a rapid colloquy was held, and who fell back in gloomy acquiescence after one murderous glance at his supplanter. I am no great believer in hypnotic suggestion or its numerous variants; I am pretty sure that nobody could make me do a thing I did not want to do, except by employing physical force, and possibly not then. Still one does see strong wills imposing themselves upon weaker ones every day, and nothing could be less characteristic of Vittoria than to give voluntary and just offence to any friend of hers. It certainly looked as if Garforth had acquired some sort of power over her. It looked, in any case, as if he were in earnest and as if he had set himself to the task of beating Ringstead off his own bat.

These things were illuminating and furnished me with some of the information of which I was in quest; though I remained, to be sure, as much as ever in the dark with regard to that disqualifying drawback which so evidently attached to my poor

pupil. Afterwards, when I was told about it and learnt that it had been *le secret de Polichinelle* all along, I wondered how I had managed to remain ignorant of what almost everybody else knew; but perhaps it is not surprising that one's eyes should fail to see the foreground while they are employed upon an unprofitable essay to pierce the mists of futurity.

Upon the more immediate future some light of an altogether pleasant kind was thrown for me by Vittoria, who was at the pains of darting in pursuit of me and plucking me by the sleeve after I had said good night to her aunt.

"Of all the bad-mannered persons I ever met in my life!" she exclaimed. "Considering that you're off to Norfolk in a day or two and that I'm off to Surrey, is it decent, do you think, to turn your back upon me without a word of farewell?"

"Who turned her back upon me to dance with a comparative stranger?" I asked.

"I like that!—when it was you who gave way to him with alacrity!"

"For that one dance, yes; I never said that you were to give him two running. Why did you?" I inquired severely.

For an instant she looked a little troubled; but then she laughed and answered, "Ah, that's just what I don't know. You shouldn't have such irresistible friends and thrust them upon me. Well, I forgive you everything at this parting hour. So

you and Lydia are going to vegetate down in Norfolk for months to come."

"We do that every summer," I replied. "At least, Lydia does. I, of course, have to oscillate between Mundsham and Hampstead."

She nodded. "And now," she resumed, "prepare to work up a delighted grin, for you are about to be told good news. Before very long I'm coming to stay with you. Oh, not uninvited! Lydia makes a point of it, and she promises that I shan't be in the least in your way."

I said what was hospitable and at the same time sincere, but warned her that she would find our small house and rough fare a great contrast to the splendours of Capelhurst Court, which was the name of her aunt's Surrey abode.

"A blessed contrast!" she returned. "Capelhurst will only be London over again. Aunt Julia can't be happy away from a crowd, and I'm beginning to think that I've had enough of crowds. So that's why—— No, that isn't why! I'm going to you, if you'll have me, because I want to see more of you both than I can here, and because I can't and won't allow you to drop me."

Upon the above gratifying assurance she gave me her hand, and then Ringstead ran downstairs to say that he had been looking for her all over the place. She had made her peace with him, I suppose. I had seen Garforth leave the house a quarter of an hour before.

CHAPTER VII

CURSED be the inventor of motor-cars ! It is, I know, silly and futile to say that sort of thing. The world must needs advance, and must, apparently, grow uglier and less pleasant to inhabit as it progresses. Tramcars must rage through the narrow streets of old Rome ; the solemn peace of Alpine heights must be destroyed by funicular railways ; steamers, laden with grotesque passengers, must hurry up and down the broad Nile. It is useless to rail against these modern aids to locomotion ; the only wise way of dealing with them is to employ them. All the same, when I think of what Mundsham was only a few years ago and what it is rapidly becoming, my sense of wrong gets the better of my philosophy. The extremely modest pretensions of the poor little place might, one would have supposed, have saved it from intrusion ; for, much as I personally love East Norfolk, I should never think of calling it a beautiful or picturesque region. But no ! The trippers—both the haughty and the comparatively humble variety—have found us out. We have to eat their dust ; we have to share the once silent and uninvaded broads with their

steam-launches and pleasure-boats; we have to encounter them—lucky if we do not have to recognise and greet them on our rambles. So it is not unlikely that Lydia and I might dispose of our summer retreat if we could think of any other spot in these islands which would answer our purpose half as well. But probably there is none. Although I give myself a nominal holiday of two or three months every year, I am bound to remain within easy reach of the studio; moreover, we have thrown down roots in a place which, if only we might be allowed to keep it to ourselves, would suit us both to perfection; and, when all's said, Mundsham does still provide us with a fair number of hours out of the twenty-four during which it is possible to forget the vicinity of the highroad.

On the evening of our annual flitting thither I was smoking an after-dinner pipe under the verandah when my sister came and seated herself beside me.

"Isn't this good!" she exclaimed, distending her nostrils to inhale the fresh North Sea breeze.

"It's so good," I replied, "that your departure from all precedent in inviting visitors to eat out of our dish becomes the more surprising."

"Only one," pleaded Lydia; "and of course I knew you wouldn't mind *her*."

"Oh, I don't mind if it's only one," I answered. "I wasn't sure."

"Not sure of what?"

"Of what lengths your indiscretion might not run to. I haven't said much—in fact, I haven't said anything—but I have seen what I have seen, and I shouldn't wonder if there had been a good deal that I haven't seen."

"Twice only," Lydia declared—"well, it may have been three times, I can't remember—did I ask Lord Ringstead to stay to lunch. It was the least I could do, after his having come all that way. And it was by the merest chance that Vittoria——"

"Quite so," I interrupted. "Well, I can't think it prudent, you know. His people aren't with him, and he doesn't impress me as being a young man of any great strength of purpose. Added to which, there are complications, as you may or may not be aware."

Lydia said she didn't know what I meant by complications, and she laughed when I suggested that perhaps that was because she had seen no more of my friend Garforth. It was something of a surprise to me to learn that, as a matter of fact, she had seen Garforth again on two occasions. Once, it appeared, he had called while I was out, and once she had gone to Christie's with him to look at some old silver which he contemplated buying. She said he was a very clever, well-informed man. Rather opinionated, it was true, but kindly and quite disposed to be a good friend to Vittoria.

"That's just it," I observed.

But Lydia would not hear of a theory which she

pronounced to be absurd on the face of it. "Much too old for her. Things of that kind don't happen," she boldly affirmed.

"I assure you they do," said I.

"Not in any serious sense. You pretend that he is in love with her; but—well, I suspect the truth is that every man who sees Vittoria falls in love with her after a fashion. And I don't leave you out of the reckoning, my dear Edwin."

"I was wondering when you would say that," I remarked.

Seldom indeed does my vigilant sister omit to charge me with having lost my heart to any lady in whose company she has seen me half a dozen times. The present accusation, however, did not threaten to have consequences as disconcerting as those which had followed sundry previous ones.

"Oh, I don't suppose it's any more serious in your case than it is in Mr. Garforth's," Lydia serenely observed. "I'm only a little sorry for you, not a bit afraid."

She was not, as far as I could ascertain, afraid of anything in the matter of Vittoria's future, and was certainly not inclined to listen to any admonitions from me upon the subject. I could only be thankful for her comparative moderation; for I would not have "put it beyond her," as they say in Ireland, to offer shelter and entertainment to a young sprig of nobility, who, apart from other attributes undesirable in a guest, probably took a

valet about with him and expected to be given champagne at dinner every day.

Vittoria's customary surroundings were doubtless as luxurious as his, or more so, and she did, on her arrival about a week later, bring with her a maid of supercilious and forbidding aspect; but she was not likely to be exacting upon the point of diet, nor, according to the first assurances that I received from her, upon any other point either. She had come, she told me, to lead the Simple Life, and she felt sure that it would do her no end of good. Whether life had begun latterly to reveal itself to her in a guise of troublesome intricacy or not I cannot say; for she curtailed some leading queries of mine by entreating me to let the outer world and its denizens go hang.

"The world, while I'm here, is to be inhabited only by you and me and Lydia and Joshua," she decreed. "Exclusive, but sufficing. These restrictions are indispensable if the Simple Life cure is to come off."

I daresay she did not want to be catechised; I daresay she was privately making up her mind, or trying to make it up. It might even be that Mundsham owed the sunshine of her presence to the circumstance that neither Ringstead nor Garforth could very well pursue her thither without being asked. There is no need to pry into causes when results are all that can be wished, and I am free to confess that I have seldom enjoyed anything so

much as I did the week of heavenly summer weather which succeeded Vittoria's advent. We spent practically the whole of it out of doors, sailing for hours on the broads, sometimes fishing a little and sometimes making long, leisurely expeditions among the sand-dunes of the sea-shore, which provided a happy hunting-ground for Joshua. I taught Vittoria to stalk rabbits with a rook-rifle, and she proved herself an apt learner; but she did not really like killing anything—not even a fish.

"I'm having such a perfectly delightful time," she said, "and sheer existence is such a joy to me just now that I can't deprive fellow-creatures of it just for fun."

"Rabbits have got to be kept down," I urged, in justification of my own less sensitive humanity.

"Not by me, though," she rejoined. "Sheep and oxen have got to be slaughtered; but if I had to choose between being a butcher or a vegetarian, rabbits' food would be my portion for the rest of my days. It isn't a principle, it's only a sort of personal fad."

I think, nevertheless, that reluctance to cause pain was a principle, if not a conscious or defined one, with her. It is a principle which, when carried to excess, has its drawbacks and dangers; but these were not made apparent to us, who had only to recognise gratefully in our charming companion a good gift of the gods. Although three is supposed to be an awkward number, I don't think it struck us

as being so, and indeed I should not wonder if one of us found a welcome security in it. Vittoria must have known that my sister was burning to be made the recipient of confidences, while she may have guessed that it would not require a great deal of encouragement to elicit sage counsels from me; so she took us, as it were, in a mixed dose, like Seidlitz powders, and thus evaded all risk of our disagreeing with her.

But on the eighth day some domestic mishap entailed sending for the plumber, and, as Lydia suffers no plumber to cross her threshold without standing by to watch his operations, Vittoria and I had to go out for a sail by ourselves. It was a hot, cloudless afternoon, and the breeze before which we stole gently for half an hour or so died away by degrees, until we lay becalmed upon an expanse of blue and glassy water which might well have been a Venetian lagoon, instead of Mundsham Broad. All of a sudden and apropos of nothing, Vittoria said—

“You didn’t like my father, did you?”

I was so little prepared for such a question that I answered honestly and baldly, “Not very much.”

“No, he isn’t the sort of person whom you would like anyhow; but your particular quarrel with him, I know, is that he treats me in such an odd way. There’s no use in denying that it is odd, and I don’t deny it; still he has never been unkind to me—never in the least unkind.”

She spoke with a sort of pleading eagerness. She did not, I surmised, want me to think that her father disliked her personally. She did not want it to be thought, and she herself did not want to think that anybody could do that.

"There must be some key to him, don't you see?" she went on. "A deep distrust of women, as women, I fancy. He owns to despising us; and he may have his reasons—what do I know? Sometimes—just for a minute—he has been quite nice, quite as if he would like to be friends with me; but then he seems to remember that that's against the rules and freezes up harder than ever."

Her great brown eyes scanned the shimmering water and the hazy shore beyond wistfully—eyes which should have been able to do what they liked with any little pompous jackanapes of a Mr. Torrance. She had been able to do nothing with him. Her voice more than her words told me that she had tried her utmost, and that she had failed and was puzzled. Being a little puzzled myself, I could think of nothing more apposite to say than—

"He trusts you with plenty of liberty, at all events."

"That," she observed, with a smile, "is exactly what seems to you so unpardonable of him, isn't it?"

"On the contrary," I replied, "it's the one thing that gives him a claim upon my gratitude."

"Oh, I don't think he would object to my being here," said Vittoria. "Besides, he doesn't know."

She evidently deemed it quite in the natural order of things that he should be ignorant of his daughter's whereabouts. She may have found it rather unnatural—it certainly seemed so to me—that he should exercise his right of objection in such unimportant matters as theatrical performances and never trouble himself to ask who her inevitable admirers might be. But now a sudden puff of wind filled our sail, causing the small craft to lie over, and gave us something else to talk about.

The breeze holding, I had to resign the tiller to my companion, who rather fancied herself at sailing a boat, and who, by reason of certain precautionary measures to which her attention had not been drawn, was in less danger of capsizing us than she appeared to be. We had quite a long spin, and Mr. Torrance had been dismissed from my mind when Vittoria said abruptly—

"I suppose he would like me to marry. I suppose, upon the whole, that would be the best thing for me to do, wouldn't it?"

"I shouldn't marry on that account," was my guarded reply.

"Oh, you wouldn't marry on any account," she returned, laughing. "To begin with, you're an independent male, and after that, you're a born bachelor. But for women in general, and especially women who aren't wanted at home—don't you

think it's best? Provided that the man is decent and that they really like him."

"Certainly not," I answered. "Really liking him isn't enough; you must really love him."

She nodded pensively, as if in assent to this dictum, but presently resumed: "Well, of course I am not in love with Mr. Garforth; I don't see how anybody could be. Only I think he is sensible and kind, and somehow, when he is with me, he makes me see things as he sees them."

Her frankness made me see things as I scarcely liked to see them, but as I had no difficulty in believing that they were.

"Has Garforth asked you to marry him?" I inquired.

She shook her head. "No; but—this is very strictly between you and me, mind—I think he will."

"How you spring things upon one!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, you aren't surprised," she returned tranquilly.

I was able to meet her with truthful and conscientious contradiction. I was very much surprised; although I refrained from stating precisely what it was that surprised me. I was likewise in some degree relieved; for Ringstead, if a good fellow enough, had always seemed to me to live and move and have his being on a plane essentially lower than hers. But with regard to Garforth, maritally viewed, what was an unbiassed adviser to

say? He was rich, intelligent, respected, neither too young nor, perhaps, too old. I decided to say nothing about him and only reiterated my previously expressed conviction that any woman who marries a man without loving him takes tremendous risks. I felt that I had my feet on firm ground there, and apparently I ended by producing some impression upon my hearer, who remarked—

“I daresay you’re right; you sound as if you ought to be. And it’s nice of you to be so romantic. Anyhow, I’m glad Mr. Garforth isn’t here to argue against you; he has such a horribly convincing style of argument!”

CHAPTER VIII

JOSHUA was not a sea-dog. He accompanied us on our aquatic excursions because he never could endure to lose sight of his mistress, but he did not enjoy them, and was wont, when afloat, to sit huddled up under the weather gunwale, his ears drooping dejectedly and his eyes expressive of the darkest forebodings. That death by drowning would be the end of it for us all was his obvious conviction, and he had the air of awaiting the inevitable with fortitude, but without zest. Proportionate to this sustained gloom was the frenzied hilarity with which he would salute firm land on disembarking. Ordinarily a staid little beast, he would at such moments fling dignity and self-respect to the winds, tearing round and round in ever-widening circles, with his tail tucked under him and his legs far apart, and not until all the breath was out of his body would he cast himself upon his back and roll ecstatically.

This exhibition, encouraged and protracted by Vittoria, whom it had the privilege of moving to immoderate laughter, was going on, as usual, while I was in the boathouse, chaining up my small craft and making all snug for the night. I heard her

voice and Joshua's, and then, somewhat indistinctly, a third voice which sounded familiar. Pausing for a moment to listen, I identified it beyond all doubt, and received the sort of shock which is, I should imagine, experienced by the simple when it dawns upon them that they have been made victims of the confidence trick.

"*Well!*" I ejaculated compendiously.

I was out of that boathouse in double-quick time, and I must say that Vittoria witnessed my swift approach without the faintest show of discomposure; although Ringstead, with his hands in his pockets and a propitiatory smirk on his face, had the grace to look a trifle confused.

"How are you, old man?—how are you?" he began, nervously effusive. "Didn't expect to see me in these parts, what?"

"Well, no; I didn't," I made grim reply. "May one ask what has brought you to such an unlikely place?"

The question was superfluous, of course; but I thought it might be amusing to hear his answer, and I am bound to say that it was.

"Oh, I just ran down upon the chance of getting some shooting that I heard of, and knowing you were in the neighbourhood——"

"So kind of you to remember that!" I interrupted. "I hope you'll have good sport. Our Norfolk grouse pack rather early, but black game are plentiful this year, I believe."

The young man looked pained. He was not, he gently informed me, in Norfolk for the purpose to which I made sarcastic allusion. "What I wanted to find out was whether I could count upon a week or so of wild-fowl shooting next winter, in case of the hunting being stopped by hard weather, don't you know. It doesn't do to leave things till the last moment."

That made his account of himself more plausible, but scarcely more credible, and when he proceeded to mention that he was prosecuting inquiries which would probably keep him busy for some days to come, I permitted myself a little smile. My smile broadened from ear to ear at the further information that he had put up at the Dun Cow in Mundsham village (as if any sportsman, however ardent, would have spent a night in that filthy little pothouse when he might just as well have found accommodation at Yarmouth!)—but perhaps this relaxation of my features did not lend them an aspect of increased benignity; for Ringstead began to stammer incoherently, and Vittoria came to his aid with—

"Lydia will be charmed to see you, I'm sure."

That backhanded rebuke left me unmoved. I was not charmed, whatever Lydia and Miss Torrance might be, nor did I feel called upon to pretend that I was. Of course Ringstead had already seen my sister; of course it was she who had sent him to meet us, after begging him to return to dinner; and, although he did not say so, I greatly feared that

she had sent down to the Dun Cow for his luggage. I promised myself that, in that case, my authority as master of the house should be asserted. Dun Cow indeed! I was neither to be done nor cowed by these unblushing schemers.

While we strolled homewards, the sinking sun at our backs throwing long shadows before us, I brought my eyes to bear upon Vittoria more than once in a stern and searching manner; but hers made no response, unless a suggestion of subdued merriment could be so described, and, not knowing what to think, I was fain to hold judgment in abeyance until I should have had a few words with my sister.

Lydia, flushed with a hard-won victory over the insidious plumber, began to narrate her exploits as soon as our two guests had retired to dress; but I need hardly say that I was not to be put off like that.

"Bother the plumber!" I exclaimed. "I don't doubt that he is a miscreant; but there are more ways than his of undermining domestic peace. What I want to know is, have you asked that young man to stay with us? Because if you have——"

"Oh, but of course I haven't!" Lydia protested. "Under the circumstances—how could I?"

That mollified me a little, but only a little. "Were you aware that he was coming here?" was my next question.

Lydia is a truthful woman. I don't say that all

women are truthful; I don't think they are, and just at that moment my opinion of the veracity of the sex had fallen to a rather low ebb. But Lydia is; so when she assured me that Ringstead's appearance had been a complete surprise to her, I accepted the statement.

"Now what about the girl?" I pursued. "Was it a surprise to her, do you suppose?"

"Oh, I think so," answered Lydia, after a moment of hesitation; "I quite think so. She may have guessed or hoped—I mean, he may have given her a hint—well, I really don't see that there would have been much harm in that."

"There would have been all the harm in the world," said I severely.

"My poor Edwin," exclaimed Lydia in commiserating accents, "I do believe you are jealous!"

It was not worth while to refute such a silly charge; but it did seem desirable, and indeed imperative, to point out that clandestine meetings between Lord Ringstead and Miss Torrance must not be connived at by us. We did not know that either the young lady's father or her aunt would approve of an engagement; we had every reason to believe that the young man's parents would not, and, in short, it was our clear duty to intimate that we could give no countenance to this sort of thing.

But here my sister joined issue with me unfalteringly. Why, if the young people were in love with one another—as she had little doubt that they were

—should we be so ill-natured as to put stumbling-blocks in their path? It might be Mr. Torrance's or Mrs. Adare's or Lady St. Erth's business to do that; it certainly was not ours.

"We can't prevent Lord Ringstead from spending a few days at Mundsham if he likes. I agree that to offer him house-room might be going a little too far, though when I think of the horrors of the Dun Cow, I do feel a brute! However, I must try to find lodgings for him somewhere in the village."

"I beg," said I, "that you will do no such thing. He has chosen his Dun Cow bed; let him lie upon it—if the fleas will let him."

"Ah, if it were only fleas!" sighed Lydia, lugubriously.

Even my stony heart was not proof against that gruesome implication. "Oh, well, shift him into other quarters, then," I said; "at best, he'll have to put up with a flock mattress and do without a bath, thank goodness!"

Whether, in the sequel, he actually incurred those merited discomforts or not I don't know; but I rather suspect not. I rather suspect that when Lydia transferred him on the morrow to the care of the village postmistress, a transfer of bedding and other necessities likewise took place from my house, without the leave of the nominal owner having been obtained or requested. For the rest, I take it that he was in no condition to be driven away by petty annoyances, and that it would have been a waste of

time and trouble to inflict them upon him. It would also have been a waste of time to study one whose state and purpose were so patent; and that was why I concentrated my powers of observation upon Vittoria, who was a little less easy to diagnose. Not really difficult, though. After watching her that evening and on the following day, when Ringstead commandeered my boat, in order that we might all visit the scene of his alleged future shooting operations, I had to conclude that Lydia, was, for all practical purposes, right about her. In other words, she was going to accept this suitor, and was perhaps more or less in love with him. She was evidently glad that he had come, evidently touched and flattered by his open adoration of her; yet one felt that her attitude was passive. I could not help wondering what would have happened if Garforth, instead of Ringstead, had dropped upon us from the clouds. Would that dictator have obtained his way? And should I have been any better pleased with the situation if he had?

For the reason to which I have just adverted, and for others which have been specified already, the situation, as it stood, was not altogether pleasing to me; and, as I do not know how to look as if I liked things when I don't, it may very well be that my demeanour, during that sail across the broads to inspect a shooting for which we were scarcely likely to supply a tenant, justified the inter-

pretation which Vittoria placed upon it. While Ringstead and Lydia were looking at the decoys and talking to the keeper, she slipped back to the boat, which I had not quitted, and, seating herself opposite to me, said—

“Don’t be so ferocious! I know what you think, and it’s barely polite of you. You’re quite wrong; I didn’t in the least expect Lord Ringstead to turn up. Honour bright, I didn’t!”

“Sometimes,” I observed, “unexpected occurrences don’t astonish one much.”

“Whether it’s astonishing or not doesn’t matter a bit,” she returned; “but I can’t have you supposing that I expected it. Should I have spoken to you as I did yesterday afternoon if I had expected it?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I don’t know why you spoke to me as you did.”

“I wanted to have your opinion.”

“Well,” said I, perhaps a little gruffly, “you got it.”

She heaved a sigh. “Yes, I got it, and I believe, on the whole, it was sound. Oh, yes, I’m sure it was sound. And now I hope you aren’t going to be cross any more, because really there isn’t anything to be cross about.”

I was not cross; I seldom am; and if, as her words distinctly implied, she proposed to follow my advice by marrying a man whom she loved, I had nothing but applause for her. To applaud her

choice, however, was beyond me. How was a woman like Vittoria Torrance to spend the rest of her days with a man like Ringstead? Granted that he was good-looking, good-natured, and, for all I know, well-educated; what further endowments had he at the service of an eager, inquiring, receptive mind which could never, if it would, rest satisfied with monotony? Then, too, there was the unquestionable, if inexplicable, fact of Lady St. Erth's hostility. Tribulation, more or less sharp, more or less dull—of both qualities, perhaps—seemed to me to threaten my poor pupil's hereafter, and I did not like to think that we were helping her towards it.

Consequently, when we reached home I was not very sorry to find a letter awaiting me which necessitated my going up to London for a couple of nights. Now I wish to point out that I absented myself because I could not help it, and for no other reason whatsoever. I say this because, when I returned on the next afternoon but one, to find my sister having tea all alone and to be informed that Ringstead and Vittoria were out sailing together, Lydia met my remonstrances with regard to flagrant neglect of a chaperon's duties with the assertion that I had made it impossible for her to perform them by "going off in a huff."

"As you are so determined to prevent what, as a matter of fact, nobody on earth has ever succeeded in preventing, or ever will," said she, "why didn't you stay here and keep me in countenance? I

couldn't have undertaken to play gooseberry even if you had asked me. But you didn't."

"I really thought," I returned, "that I might trust you to observe customs and traditions of which the expediency must be evident to all right-thinking persons. I am not only a right-thinking person, but a peculiarly demure and well-behaved one; yet, unless I am much mistaken in you, you wouldn't be best pleased if I were to go off for the whole afternoon in a boat with some young woman or other."

"Why, I thought you had spent the whole afternoon in a boat with Vittoria only the other day!" cried Lydia.

For the moment I had forgotten that circumstance; but, of course, there was no analogy between the two cases. What was perhaps rather more to the point was that, as Lydia had said, nobody on earth can prevent a certain order of events from coming to pass. If we had essayed to drive Nature and Ringstead off our premises with a pitchfork, the pair of them would only have run round to their goal by some other road.

"Well," said I, "I wash my hands of the whole business. Don't blame me when trouble comes of it, that's all."

"I won't blame you," Lydia promised; "but I really don't think there will be any serious trouble. Even if Mr. Torrance should turn out to be . . . Oh, bother! here's some horror in a motor!"

There was no doubt about it. I had heard the grinding and hooting of the thing outside, but had hoped it would pass on, instead of coming to a standstill at our gate, as it had done. Raising myself on tiptoe, I saw the solitary occupant descend, and when he turned to face the house, I recognised Garforth.

"This only was wanting!" I ejaculated.

CHAPTER IX

"WELL, Trathan," began our visitor, after he had shaken hands with Lydia and had eulogised the carnations which are almost the only flowers that we can induce to thrive upon our sandy soil; "no escape from prying intruders for you, you see! I'm sorry; but this island of yours is altogether too small for purposes of exclusion, and, being in the neighbourhood for a day or two, I couldn't refuse myself the pleasure of paying you and Miss Lydia a passing call."

"We should never have forgiven you if you had," declared Lydia, propitiated, no doubt, by that judicious piece of horticultural flattery.

The question, thought I to myself, was whether Garforth would ever forgive us when he should have heard what he was sure to hear in a few minutes. As for any pleasure that he might have anticipated from a visit to Mundsham, I was not so simple as to imagine that our company could supply it; nor, even in this era of annihilated distances, can people who live five-and-thirty miles away be considered exactly neighbours. But what, after all, are thirty-five poor little miles to a space-devouring monster such as that which we could hear panting

at our gate? It was Garforth's own motor (doubtless he took it about with him wherever he went, as a small item in his personal kit), and not much more than an hour, I daresay, had been needed to transport him to us from the great house in the next county where he was staying.

"So you have our friend Miss Torrance with you, I understand," said he, as soon as he had sufficiently accounted for his so-called vicinity to our abode.

"Who told you that?" I inquired.

Mrs. Adare, it seemed, had been his informant. "It isn't a secret, is it?" he asked.

"Well, I gather that she doesn't wish it to be generally known," I answered. "The fact is that she came here with the idea of leading a very quiet rustic existence and seeing nobody."

"She'll consent to see me, I hope," Garforth said, with a placid smile.

He really ought not to have looked so confident of his welcome as all that, and I felt a trifle provoked.

"Unfortunately," said I, "she is not at home. She has gone out sailing with Ringstead, and when they will be back I can't tell you. So much depends upon the wind."

I thought he might just as well have it full in the face, like that, at once, and I must say that he stood fire splendidly. Without the slightest symptom of discomfiture, he remarked—

"Is that so? Then Lord Ringstead also is your guest?"

Lydia rather hurriedly interposed. "Oh, dear, no! Lord Ringstead has taken rooms in the village, only for a few days. He wants to make arrangements about duck-shooting for next winter."

Garforth fixed her with his pale-grey eyes, smiled broadly, and shook his finger at her. "I don't believe it, Miss Lydia! Now that isn't a rude thing to say to a lady, because you don't believe it either. I may have to be rude to you, though, before I leave. This is aiding and abetting, if it's no worse."

"I'm as innocent as the driven snow!" Lydia protested. "He never had a hint from me; I didn't even know his address. I can't prevent people from taking lodgings in the village, can I?"

"It seems to me," returned Garforth, "that you might prevent young ladies who are under your care from going out sailing with casual lodgers. To be quite frank with you, I think that's just one of the things that you ought to prevent. You see," he added explanatorily, turning to me, "your sister and I are not of one mind about that young man. Her singular notion is that he is good enough for Miss Torrance; whereas you and I know very well that he isn't."

Of course I knew that he was not; but, if it came

to that, is equivalence such an all-important factor? Vittoria was perhaps inclined towards Ringstead; she certainly was not enamoured of his American rival. Having no apt rejoinder ready, I only shrugged my shoulders and grunted.

Garforth was, at any rate, quite good-humoured about it. I should have thought that he might have been a little apprehensive; but he did not appear to be so. He accepted Lydia's offer of tea, began to chat about his plans for the summer and autumn and made it clear, without saying so, that he meant to remain where he was until the absentee should return. Impossible to refuse a certain wondering respect to a man who must surely have realised that he was beaten, yet who maintained the aspect of an undismayed combatant!

After he had been sitting with us for the best part of an hour he pricked up his ears and remarked that, if they did not deceive him, he could hear Vittoria's step on the road. His sense of hearing must have been abnormally acute; for, although I got up and walked to the open window, half a minute elapsed before I beheld the slow approach of the young couple. But as soon as I did see them I saw what no abnormal keenness of vision was needed to recognise. They dawdled across the strip of garden so close together that they might have been holding hands; their heads were bent; their faces were turned towards one another; they seemed to be exchanging whispers, in spite of there being abso-

lutely no occasion to whisper. When two people behave like that, one knows what it means. I presume that Garforth, who had stolen up softly behind me and was looking over my shoulder, knew what it meant; but all he said was—

“What a lovely evening! I don't wonder that Miss Vittoria was tempted to stay out late.”

I, for my part, did not wonder that Miss Vittoria, who caught sight of us at that moment, started and flushed. She could not have expected to see Garforth; assuredly she could not be pleased at seeing him; possibly she was a little afraid of him. However, she waved her hand to us gaily, and by the time that she had entered the house and joined us, she had recovered full possession of herself.

“Who says that Mundsham is out of humanity's reach?” she cried, while Garforth held her hand and scrutinised her in his intent, disconcerting way.

“I've been saying to our friends here,” he returned, “that that description no longer applies to any spot in the British Isles. You shouldn't assume that you can conceal yourself by just burying your head in an East Norfolk sandhill.”

She made some retort which I did not catch. She was feeling rather uncomfortable, I daresay, and conscious of our interrogative regards.

Ringstead was not in the least uncomfortable. He was jubilant, exultant, eager (one conjectured)

to blazon forth the great news of his triumph to the four corners of the earth. Well, of course a man in his condition and circumstances looks rather a fool to the cold outsider, and as for me, I had no particular affection for Ringstead, while I had a very deep and heartfelt conviction that Vittoria was throwing herself away upon him; yet, for some subtle reason or other, all the world loves a lover. This lover was one great smile from the crown of his sleek head to the soles of his white buckskin shoes; he was so exuberantly, youthfully, gloriously happy that a species of infection emanated from his person, and I verily believe that I should have said something quite pleasant to him if Lydia had not been in such haste to dismiss him from the premises. She told him that he would only just have time to go and dress for dinner—though in truth there was plenty of time—and I seemed to detect an expression of relief on her speaking countenance after he had departed, with a valedictory nod to our other visitor.

That other visitor returned the nod in a manner suggestive—perhaps intentionally suggestive—of supreme indifference; after which he said—

“Now, Miss Vittoria, don’t you want to take me down to the sea-shore and show me your coast-line before I go?”

To judge by her face, that was the last thing that she wanted to do, and plenty of good excuses for declining a rather cool proposal lay ready to her

hand; but Garforth, it appeared, could always command her obedience. She moved in the direction of the door with docility, if without enthusiasm, and presently I was alone with my sister, of whom I inquired—

“Why did you shoo Ringstead away? You have let the poor girl in for a bad quarter of an hour, and I wouldn’t swear that you haven’t let her in for a rupture of her engagement. Because there is an engagement, you know.”

“Oh, I hope so,” responded Lydia tranquilly. “It was best to get rid of Lord Ringstead, because Mr. Garforth evidently intended to have a few private words with Vittoria, and there might have been some unpleasantness about it; one never knows. But I don’t believe he will persuade her to break off her engagement, and the quarter of an hour won’t be made bad for her. He isn’t bad; he’s only rather obstinate and prejudiced. All he wishes is to be of service to her.”

“If you think that is all he wishes and all he came thundering through leagues of dust for, your analysis of a peculiarly candid disposition can’t have gone very deep,” I rejoined.

But indeed I was accustomed to Lydia’s comfortable habit of taking it for granted that everybody was what it might happen to suit her purpose that he or she should be. Not caring at the moment to enter upon a discussion with her as to the respective qualities of the two individuals neither of whom

was altogether what I should have liked him to be, I strolled out through the garden and down towards the dunes, with the design of intercepting Vittoria on her way back. Garforth, I surmised, would not come back; and he did not. After a time, Vittoria appeared alone, charged with his apologies. He had but a bare hour in which to cover a distance of thirty-five miles and change for dinner. Moreover, he had reason to believe that members of the county constabulary were on the look-out for him at more than one point of his road.

"They may collar him and hale him off to prison for anything I care," was my unsympathising comment. "He deserves the worst that can befall him for having made you cry; although you very likely deserved some of the things that he said to you."

"I have *not* been crying!" Vittoria protested.

"Don't tell me that," said I sternly.

So then, by way of showing that there were no tears in her eyes, she wiped them away and pleaded, in a small, humble voice, that Mr. Garforth had been "quite kind."

"Before we embark upon the subject of Garforth and his kindness," I said, "what have you to tell me?"

She looked up at me with a deprecatory smile. "Oh, I think you know," was her reply.

I admitted that I knew. There did not seem to be any particular use in admitting that I was a

little sorry. What, after all, was there to be sorry about, provided that she loved the young fellow? And she gave me to understand that she did.

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" said she, laughing, in answer to direct inquiries.

"I suppose it does," I confessed, "since Garforth hasn't shaken you. He tried, I presume."

She sighed. "Oh, yes, he tried. It was horrid, and it made me feel . . . But, as I tell you, he was quite kind. Only, just before he left, he said he liked to fight fair, and he thought I ought to know that I should never be Lady Ringstead if he could help it."

I pursed up my lips, and raised my eyebrows. "He did, did he?" I asked. "But that may be serious."

"How can it be?" Vittoria returned. "How can he come between us, unless we let him? Nobody in the world can!"

Lord St. Erth could; for his son was presumably dependent upon him. Mr. Torrance could. For aught I knew, there might be others, armed with knowledge of which Ringstead was probably not in possession, and capable of disastrous intervention. But I had not the heart to suggest such things, and Vittoria, suddenly catching me by the arm, said—

"Anyhow, you'll be on my side. And you're glad? Oh, do be nice and say you're glad!"

"I'm like George Washington and Garforth, and other fine characters," I replied: "I can't tell a lie to please anybody. As far as being on your side goes, though, you may be pretty sure that I shall always be that."

CHAPTER X

IF I could not bring myself to tell Vittoria that her betrothal was a source of pure joy to me, I felt no difficulty or hesitation in congratulating Ringstead. That young man was blessed far beyond his deserts, and since he humbly acknowledged as much, there was little legitimate ground for contention with him. Moreover, as I said before, it was hard to resist the contagion of his overflowing bliss. So, in short, I behaved very amiably at the dinner-table and received the reward of several approving nods from my sister. But some people are rather exacting. Towards midnight I was standing in the garden beneath the stars, after seeing the last of Ringstead (his exit had required a little gentle persuasion), when Vittoria advanced from the house, accompanied by Joshua, whom she openly incited to bite me in the leg. And when I inquired the reason of these hostile demonstrations—which I need not say were disregarded by a dog of proved sagacity—she made reply—

“Because you aren’t nice. Because you don’t like him.”

“Because I don’t like Joshua?” I asked.

She let that inept query pass, and went on :

"Why don't you? What's wrong with him? Isn't he good and kind and brave and handsome and quite as clever as most people?"

"I am ready to allow that he is all that," I assented.

"And he's awfully fond of me," Vittoria added, as a crown to her edifice of eulogy.

"So am I. So is Garforth. So is Lydia. So are all and sundry," I returned. "Don't ask me to account such an unavoidable sentiment as that to him for righteousness. The point is——"

"Oh, yes, I know," interrupted Vittoria. "But I *am*! I'm awfully fond of him. Now, then!"

"You say that as defiantly as if it wasn't true," I remarked.

Well, I had to beg pardon. I had to own myself convinced; and indeed her asseverations were more or less convincing. How is a man to probe the recesses of the female heart? I suspect that women's hearts are constructed upon a plan altogether different from ours, and it may be that in their case love begets love, whereas I make bold to affirm that with us such a phenomenon does not occur. Anyhow, I was able to give modified satisfaction, and no resentment was expressed when I took the liberty of observing that Mr. Torrance and Mrs. Adare and Lady St. Erth ought to be informed without delay of what had come to pass.

"Oh, of course," Vittoria agreed. "Father and Aunt Julia will be pleased, I am sure; I don't

know quite so much about the other old things. Ringstead says they would like him to marry somebody with an enormous fortune; but they can't expect to have all they would like, can they?"

I could not tell what they expected or what they might be prepared to refuse; but it was, I feared, certain that they would begin by disapproving of their son's engagement. I also feared that they would assign reasons and that these might take the form of a painful revelation to Vittoria. As a rule, I am a fairly good sleeper, but I must not have worrying topics thrust upon me the last thing before I go to bed, and I lay awake for an unconscionably long time that night.

In the morning, however, came an unforeseen and complete diversion. Vittoria appeared at breakfast with a rather rueful face and a letter from her aunt which necessitated her leaving us as soon as her things could be packed. Mr. Torrance, it seemed, was somewhat seriously unwell. The Nauheim doctor had written to Mrs. Adare to say that while he did not consider his patient's condition positively alarming, he thought it his duty to recommend that some member of the family should come out from England, and Mrs. Adare evidently did not think it her duty to be that member. No doubt, if the man was really ill, his daughter was the proper person to go to him; although he did not seem to have expressed any

wish to see her. He felt none, Vittoria said, sighing a little wistfully. She was less anxious about her father's health, as to which his London doctor had spoken in reassuring terms, than disturbed at the prospect of intruding upon him uninvited.

"But I suppose I must take the risk of being snubbed," she concluded; and we could only agree with her.

She proposed to take the night boat from Queenborough to Flushing. She was quite accustomed to foreign travel, and laughed at the idea of my escorting her to her destination. What I might do for her, if I would be so kind, she said, would be to take charge of Joshua until her return, which might very likely be within a week. "For it's ten chances to one that the word of command I shall get will be 'As you were!'"

"Quick march!" was the word of command that Ringstead received an hour later. At first he was for accompanying his betrothed across the North Sea; but he was brought to recognise that such a proceeding was wholly inadmissible, and he likewise bowed to Vittoria's decree that he should go home straightway, in order to acquaint his parents with intelligence which closely concerned them. He was, of course, somewhat disconsolate at being so abruptly bereft of her; yet, after we had conducted her to the station and had seen the train bear her and her stately maid away, he observed to me in confidence that, although this was an infernal

bore, it might perhaps turn out to be a disguised blessing. And, as I did not at once take his meaning, he was good enough to put it into plain language for me.

"You see, if anything were to happen to the old chap—I'm not wishing for his death; I'm sure I hope he'll be all right, though the doctor must think pretty badly of the case—if anything were to happen to him, why—it would make a lot of difference with my people."

"Oh, would it?" said I. "You anticipate trouble with your people, then?"

"I don't expect them to clap their hands," the young man confessed. "The governor may give in, after grumbling a bit; but her ladyship will be a harder nut to crack. To begin with, she doesn't know I'm here. She thinks I'm in Scotland, and she's sure to accuse me of having deceived her."

"Oh, if that's all!" I put in.

"But it isn't. She has been dead against Vittoria from the first, and all the more so, I do believe, because she can't help liking her. Personally, I think the sort of notions she has are rot. Besides, we have no particular business to give ourselves airs; we were half squires, half yeomen a few generations ago. But she descends from the Plantagenets, and she don't allow anybody to forget it. Tremendously sincere, too, and conscientious and pious and all that. Which makes her deuced awkward to handle."

He frowned at the toe of his neat little boot, with which he was tracing lines upon the dusty platform, and seemed to be waging in advance the battle which awaited him.

"But six thousand a year, or whatever it is, might mitigate the haughty Plantagenet pretensions?" I suggested presently.

He looked up, with a deprecating laugh. "Well, the fact is we're quite desperately short of coin. Ever since I can remember, it has been rubbed into me that I must marry money. And although Vittoria isn't what people call an heiress in these days, her fortune, when she gets it, ought just about to set me on my legs. So if I could represent that she was coming into her own at once——"

"I see," said I. "Well, let us hope that Mr. Torrance will be so obliging as to die; though I am inclined to doubt whether he is either obliging or moribund."

I might have added that I was beginning to doubt whether Ringstead's constancy would resist the onslaught which he so evidently dreaded; but upon this point he gave explicit assurances before he went away. Happen what might, he would never give up Vittoria! I gathered that, if the worst came to the worst, he would even be ready to surrender the meagre allowance made to him by his father and live upon such income as might be obtainable from hers.

It remained to be seen in what light the affair

would be regarded by Mr. Torrance, who, even without Plantagenet blood, was perhaps not wholly devoid of pride. But his views were never ascertained; for Fate decreed that he should expire very suddenly an hour or two before his daughter reached Nauheim. We had a telegram from Vittoria, and then, on the following day, a letter from Mrs. Adare, who was much shocked and distressed, and who ingenuously avowed that what added bitterness to this unexpected bereavement was the necessary cancelling of many important fixtures for which every preparation had been made. Never, it appeared, had Felix shown himself less worthy of his name than in his selection of an opportunity to die. One small comfort was that there would be no need for Mrs. Adare to go to Germany.

"Dick Torrance has already started, and will see to everything. I suppose the funeral will be at Barholme; but that will be for him and Vittoria to decide. You have been so kind to the poor child that I thought you would like to have a few lines. I will let you know as soon as I have any more news of her."

However, she did not write again, nor did we receive any further communication from Vittoria in the course of the ensuing week. No doubt Dick Torrance, whoever he might be, had looked after her and brought her safely home; for I saw in one of the newspapers a short account of her father's

obsequies in Lincolnshire, at which it was stated that she had been present. Then, some days later, another journal—one of those weekly publications which concern themselves with social incidents—contained an announcement of a much more interesting, not to say startling, nature.

"The late Mr. Torrance of Barholme," readers were informed, "had been for many years an invalid and was seldom seen outside the small circle of his intimates. He was a good landlord and a generous contributor to local charities. Gifted in no ordinary degree with artistic taste and discrimination, he profited, during his youth, by a residence of several years in Italy to get together a small, but carefully selected, collection of pictures and statuary, which, together with his estates and the bulk of his personal property, passes, under his will, to his kinsman Mr. Richard Torrance. A sum of £20,000 is bequeathed to his daughter Miss Vittoria Torrance, who was so much admired last season, when staying with her aunt, Mrs. Adare."

"What," I asked my sister, "do you make of that?"

Lydia owned herself perplexed. All she had to say—and that seemed very little to the purpose—was that she had always told me the man was an old pig.

"Yes," I replied; "but if I remember rightly, you also told me that he was an unpunished felon."

Whereas it appears that he lived and died in the odour of sanctity and benevolence."

"Oh, they're bound to say that sort of thing about any dead person who hasn't actually been sentenced to a term of penal servitude," Lydia declared. "And if you speak of felony, what could be more felonious than cutting off his only child with such a pittance?"

"I don't know that anything could," I answered; "I don't know whether it's justifiable or unjustifiable. What I do know is that your imprudence in fostering a love-affair which never looked too promising is likely to have deplorable results. The St. Erths might have been squared for £6,000 a year; they won't look at £600."

Lydia said it was unlike me and unworthy of me to impute a low habit of mind to my neighbours. She was, at all events, positive that the young people would remain faithful to one another, even though they should, unhappily, be confronted by low aims and low ideals. She said £20,000 ought to bring in £800 a year without risk, and Lord St. Erth could hardly allow his eldest son less than £500. That made £1,300 a year, upon which sum it was not impossible to maintain existence. Finally, she charged me with being unwilling in my heart that Vittoria should ever marry anybody.

All this, or a good part of it, may have been true; but it was not specially helpful or pertinent. A man does not disinherit his only child without

grave reasons; and since it was impossible to suppose that poor Vittoria herself had been guilty of any misdemeanour, I had to conclude that her mother had been in some way scandalous. Lydia, while provisionally accepting that theory, was not to be persuaded that either Lady St. Erth or anybody else would be likely to care a brass farthing about aberrations on the part of the deceased Mrs. Torrance.

"You know more than I do about people high up in the world, Edwin," said she; "but even I can't help hearing a little, and it's notorious that the middle-class standard of morality doesn't obtain amongst them. I don't doubt that the loss of the money will be a disappointment; but, when all's said and done, money isn't everything. You, who have such a fine disdain for pecuniary considerations, must surely admit that!"

I don't know that there is anything so very fine in my inability to make bargains or to bring business principles to bear upon the management of my affairs. In other respects I flatter myself that I have the average endowment of common sense, and it was therefore beyond me to echo my sister's confident prediction that everything would come right in the end.

"Anyhow," she wound up by remarking, "we shall soon hear what has happened and is going to happen."

It seemed probable that we should; yet for

several anxious days the post brought us no tidings, and when at length I did obtain a ray of sidelight upon the situation, it was scarcely of a nature to dispel my forebodings. I had been spending some hours in the studio at Hampstead and was making my way to my club towards evening when I saw Ringstead dart out of a gunsmith's shop in St. James's Street and jump into a hansom which was waiting for him. Although he appeared to be in a hurry, he descended to the pavement, in response to my hail, and said he was jolly glad to have come across me.

"Because you'll be seeing Vittoria, I suppose, and you can tell her, with my love, that she may trust me."

"I should have thought," said I, "that that was one of those things which you would do better to tell her yourself."

"So I have, of course, by letter; but I'm just off to Scotland. In fact, I must look sharp to catch the train."

At the risk of causing him to miss it, I maintained my position between him and the waiting hansom. "Why," I inquired, "are you going to Scotland?"

He hastily explained. He had been going anyhow. He was due to join a shooting-party, and Vittoria agreed with him that, under the circumstances, much the best thing he could do was to absent himself.

"What circumstances?" I persisted.

At this he began to show signs of not unpardonable impatience. "Oh, well, you know what I told you at Mundsham, and, as you may imagine, matters haven't been made smoother by old Torrance's outrageous will. A beastly shame, I call it, and it seems to me that if he had made up his mind to do her out of pretty nearly everything, he might at least have given her some warning of what she had to expect. But that's neither here nor there. You tell her from me not to be downhearted, because nothing will ever induce me to give her up. I say, I really must make a bolt for it now!"

Perhaps he did well to make a bolt for it; perhaps it was wise to remove himself temporarily from the orbit of family cyclones. Yet I could not help feeling that if I had been in his place, I should have preferred to force on a contest which I meant to win. His protestations of fidelity were doubtless sincere; but Ringstead, somehow, had never given me the impression of much stability. Moreover, I did not half like his message to Vittoria. It was pretty cool to exhort her not to be downhearted and then leave her—for that was what he was virtually doing, whether he realised it or not—to fight his battles for him. Not after that fashion do lovers who are worth fighting for speak or act.

CHAPTER XI

LYDIA, who entertains a painfully extravagant estimate of my professional achievements, is pleased to rate my capacity in ordinary, everyday affairs as a minus quantity. She says, by way of consoling me, that all great artists are grown-up children, and that since they dwell habitually in the clouds, they cannot be expected to know much about the ways of mere crawlers upon the surface of this prosaic planet. I suppose that must be her reason for laughing in a superior manner whenever I credit my fellow-mortals with prosaic tendencies, her own inclination, I have noticed, being to clothe them (if she likes them) in the garb of romance. Be that as it may, she refused to see anything ominous or disquieting in Ringstead's departure to shoot grouse or stalk deer at a critical juncture. She would not even allow that the juncture was critical.

"There's the money difficulty," she conceded, "and I suppose there must be something else, though I doubt its being of any real consequence; but you won't get me to believe that Lord Ringstead is a gay deceiver, and I shouldn't wonder if Vittoria had begged him to go away for a time.

Very likely she may have thought that she could manage better without him. She can manage anything and anybody! You yourself told me that she had made a conquest of Lady St. Erth."

I had committed myself to no such assertion, although I had then, and have still, an almost unlimited faith in Vittoria's conquering powers. But it seemed to me quite upon the cards that she might not care to exercise them in this particular instance. To humanise a glacial and forbidding old lady by means of pretty cajoleries had been all very well at a London luncheon-party a few months back; to employ the same tactics now, with a view to becoming that lady's daughter-in-law against her expressed will, would be hardly possible without some sacrifice of self-respect. Besides, nothing was more unlikely than that Vittoria would be allowed a chance of approaching Lady St. Erth.

"I wish at least we knew where she was!" I sighed.

"Who? Vittoria?" asked my sister. "Do you mean to say that you didn't find out from Lord Ringstead?"

I had to confess that I had omitted, in a very hurried interview, to make inquiry upon the point, and Lydia, throwing up her hands, exclaimed—

"Oh, how characteristic!"

Well, Vittoria was where one might have guessed that she would be, seeing that she had been deprived of what ought to have been her home.

That much I learnt the next morning, when the post brought me a letter from Mrs. Adare—a letter which was also an invitation or summons, urgently worded—

“Do, like a dear, good man, come to me at once for a night, or for as many nights as you can spare,” my correspondent wrote. “I am dreadfully worried about Vittoria, who is here, and it’s partly your fault, you know, so you must feel that you owe it to me to give me all the help and advice you can. Not a soul in the house but ourselves, which sounds like a gruesome prospect for you; but I’m sure you won’t mind. I can’t tell you how upset I have been by all these horrid things happening, one after another! Or, rather, I *will* tell you the whole list of my troubles as soon as I see you. Now telegraph to say you are coming, and earn the gratitude of yours always,

“JULIA ADARE.

“Vittoria says, will you please bring the dog with you?”

Whether or not it could be called in any sense my fault that Mrs. Adare had been worried, I had neither the heart nor the wish to disregard her signals of distress; so Joshua and I started for Surrey as soon as might be, arriving at our destination late in the afternoon. A very attractive destination it was, as seen under conditions of

brilliant summer weather, and a fortunate woman, notwithstanding incidental worries, was the owner of Capelhurst Court. The house, placed on rising ground and backed by the undulating line of the chalk hills, was a rambling, red-brick structure, parts of which may have been Jacobean, while others were of obviously recent date—so recent that quick-growing creepers had not yet had quite time to mask the too raw hue of their modernity. The whole had that pleasing, homelike effect which frank incongruity of architecture so often has, and I contemplated it appreciatively as I traversed the park in the open carriage which had been sent to the station to meet me. Joshua preferred to run. He had been much depressed ever since his mistress had deserted him; but he knew very well where he was now, and was too excited and impatient to sit still. Indeed, his long legs soon carried him ahead of the high-stepping horses; so that he was already out of sight when a waved sunshade, at the entrance to the shrubberies and gardens which surrounded the house, brought my equipage to a standstill.

Bareheaded beneath the sunshade was Mrs. Adare, who besought me to alight and who, when I had obeyed, lost no time in keeping her promise to tell me what her troubles were. She was a little incoherent, and her tale was broken by frequent divagations into side-issues; but the upshot of it appeared to be that Vittoria ought never to have been allowed to engage herself to young Ringstead,

that of course, as things had fallen out, nothing could come of it, that Lady St. Erth was "on her hind-legs," that Lord St. Erth had practically forbidden the banns, and that really, upon the whole, one could scarcely blame them. An attempt to blame me had to be nipped in the bud. I said—

"Let it be clearly understood between us that I accept no responsibility for what has occurred. The truth is that, if I had had the power, I should have sent Ringstead flying into infinite space the moment after he dropped upon us, for I can't think that he is your niece's equal in any respect; but I could no more help his proposing to her than I could prevent her from accepting him. Mundsham doesn't belong to me, and, as the post-mistress has a couple of stuffy rooms to let——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Mrs. Adare; "nobody knows better than I do how helpless one is! And you and your sister have been so kind to poor Vittoria! Please don't think that I'm ungrateful."

"The proof that you're not," I answered, with swift prescience, "is that you're going to grant me the privilege of doing something unpleasant for you."

She laughed. "Oh, not too unpleasant. Not for you, at least, though it would be horrid for me. But I'll come to that presently. What I was going to say was that, even if you couldn't drive Lord Ringstead away, you might have packed Vittoria off here when you saw how the land lay."

"I suppose we might," I agreed; "but it would have been very rude and inhospitable behaviour, and how was I to guess that you disapproved of the lie of the land, which must have been perfectly apparent to you before you left London?"

"I didn't exactly disapprove," Mrs. Adare owned, with a sigh. "There was nothing to disapprove of in the young man himself, and for Vittoria the match would have been a good one. But, knowing what Jane St. Erth is, I couldn't doubt that there would be a fuss about it, and I was without the slightest clue as to what my brother wished or intended. Poor Felix never told anybody anything, and if one ventured to ask him a question he at once said he was ill. Then he goes and makes this extraordinary will! I do think it was rather extraordinary of him, don't you?"

"Upon the face of it," I replied, "I should call it utterly inexcusable and unnatural of him."

Mrs. Adare sighed again. "Well," she returned, "I don't say that Vittoria was, strictly speaking, entitled to succeed to Barholme; only one hoped that if other arrangements had been made, something would have been said about them. Dick Torrance is a very good fellow, but he's only a third or fourth cousin of ours, and I don't think he really expected to come into the property, though he says hints were given him from time to time. In short, I strongly suspect that Felix

would have overlooked everything else if he hadn't been possessed with such a hatred and distrust of all women."

It looked as if we might be coming to the point at last.

"What do you mean by 'everything else'?" I inquired.

Mrs. Adare turned an impatient countenance upon me. "Well, the poor girl's illegitimacy, of course. Why do you gape like that? Is it possible that you didn't know! I should have thought somebody was sure to have told you. I meant to tell you myself, I remember, only one dislikes talking about such things."

Nobody had told me; yet my unassisted intelligence might have hit upon the key to a mystery which had not been so very far to seek, and I was as much ashamed of my density as I was dismayed by Mrs. Adare's revelation. For it did, at this first moment, strike me as completely justifying the attitude of the St. Erths.

"So that's it!" I ejaculated, after a pause.

"That's it; and, as I say, one has to acknowledge that Vittoria's actual claim was a little sketchy. At the same time, I always imagined that Felix would leave her all he had. He wasn't fond of her, it's true; but then he wasn't fond of anybody, and he had a quite violent detestation of women. The result of generalising from the infidelities of Signorina Magnani, one must suppose."

"Was Signorina Magnani Vittoria's mother?" I asked.

Mrs. Adare nodded. "A contralto who was famous in her day. Famous or infamous, I dare say, for other things besides her voice and her beauty; but I know next to nothing about her. Felix . . . well, as you've met him, I needn't tell you the sort of man that he was. He would have no suspicions, and then, when he discovered that he wasn't alone in the lady's favours, his vanity would be wounded to that degree that nothing short of banning her whole sex would satisfy him."

"The only strange thing," I observed, "is that he didn't ban and banish his daughter."

"No, not so very strange. From the moment that she was his daughter, you see! . . . He looked at himself and everything belonging to him through a perpetual magnifying-glass; I can understand his thinking that he had no alternative. After a fashion, and as far as it could be managed, he did banish her; but he acknowledged her and provided for her immediately."

We had been strolling along grassy paths, flanked by herbaceous borders and flowering shrubs. As we now found ourselves beside a garden bench, Mrs. Adare said, "Sit down, and I'll give you the whole story in a dozen words."

Nobody could have done that, least of all my voluble hostess; but here is her narration, set forth as succinctly as may be.

Many years ago, Felix Torrance, wandering about Northern Italy in the character of a well-to-do and highly dissatisfied dilettante, fell under the spell of Vittoria Magnani, who was at that time singing at La Scala and attracting admirers of all nationalities. What attraction the pompous little Englishman could have had for her must remain unexplained and inexplicable; but it was apparently strong enough to induce her to give up the stage at his bidding, and the pair seem to have lived together in seclusion for something over a year, during which period a daughter was born to them. Then came the inevitable satiety, the inevitable treachery, the inevitable rupture. Whether the Italian siren had inspired her brother with an undying passion or whether it was only his self-love that had suffered by her abandonment of him Mrs. Adare could not say; but certain it was that what would have been a mere episode in the lives of most men had assumed for him the proportions of a veritable cataclysm. He returned forthwith to his own country, shut himself up in Lincolnshire, became a recluse, a misogynist, a valetudinarian, and never spoke, or permitted any one else to speak, of his past. When, in the fulness of time, his daughter, who had been educated abroad, came to reside intermittently with him at Barholme, he simply introduced her to the neighbours as his daughter, and if they chose to regard him as a widower, it was perhaps not his business to

undecieve them. Naturally, the facts had become known; but not through any indiscreet admission on his part. Not once had Mrs. Adare heard him allude to Signorina Magnani (who, for the rest, had been long dead); not once had he spoken of, or displayed any preoccupation about, Vittoria's necessarily equivocal social position. That he had no affection for the girl was only too manifest; yet he had publicly recognised her, he had dealt generously with her in a monetary sense, and, since he had neither son nor any near relative, it had been reasonable enough to assume that she would ultimately inherit his property.

"The fact is," Mrs. Adare concluded, "that I didn't know Felix, and I doubt whether anybody else in the world did either. He wasn't a man to tolerate interference, and he could make himself quite extraordinarily disagreeable and alarming when he was annoyed. So—well, so one didn't annoy him if one could help it. Now I'm sure you'll say that it was his duty to let Vittoria know the truth."

"She doesn't know it, then?" I interrupted.

"No, she doesn't, and I'm afraid she hasn't even an inkling of it. I quite agree that her father ought to have told her, and I suppose it was only in order to spare himself an upsetting scene that he never did; but before you condemn me for having kept her in ignorance, please remember that I had no authority from Felix to speak and that

I saw no particular reason why she shouldn't remain in the dark for ever. Now, of course, the whole situation has been changed. This will of her father's, and—and other things, have got to be accounted for, and, painful as telling her will be, it seems to me that she must be told."

"I certainly think you will have to tell her," said I.

"Yes," assented Mrs. Adare hesitatingly; "unless—unless *you* will be so very good and kind and friendly as to relieve me of that *corvée*."

I can't say that her request took me by surprise. I had seen it coming, and I perfectly understood her characteristic longing to shirk what was distasteful to her. Nevertheless, she had no sort of right to cast her family burdens upon the back of an outsider, however good, kind and friendly he might be, and I told her so.

"Do you by any chance imagine," I asked, "that I shall enjoy bringing down this poor child's illusory world about her ears like a house of cards? Because I take it that I am to prepare her for the loss of her lover, in addition to the loss of her name."

"Oh no, dear Mr. Trathan," Mrs. Adare answered, "I don't for one moment expect you to *enjoy* it. But indeed I am not thinking of myself or you so much as of Vittoria. What I feel is that you will do it so infinitely better than I could! She is very much attached to you; she admires

you as a distinguished man—which of course you are—and she would be willing to listen to anything that you said and to be guided by your advice. Whereas she would naturally be rather angry with me at first for having held my tongue all this long time, and, as my conscience isn't quite clear, I should be sure to be clumsy and hurt her by saying things which you, with your tact and dexterity, would know how to avoid."

"Plausible," I remarked; "plausible and complimentary, but unconvincing. I expect I shall have to do it, though."

That I should have to do it was plain enough. I don't know that I bear a high reputation for tact, and if anybody has ever called me dexterous, it has not been in connection with such missions as that which Mrs. Adare sought to impose upon me; yet it might be that I was so far better qualified to undertake it than she was that I was a man. Women, I think, can seldom bring themselves, as bearers of ill tidings, to be mercifully blunt; which means that they get on one another's nerves and are apt, not only to give needless pain, but to provoke recriminations, just or unjust. I cut short Mrs. Adare's profuse thanks by reminding her that she had not yet told me what I was to say to Vittoria with regard to her engagement.

"You spoke, a while ago, as if it must come to an end," I remarked; "but Ringstead, whom I saw for a moment in London yesterday, didn't

seem to be of that opinion, and I suppose he is aware of the circumstances?"

"Oh, dear, yes!" replied Mrs. Adare. "Like everybody else, except you, he has been aware of them all along. That is, he knew, as everybody else did, what was rumoured. There's a good deal of difference, though, between a rumour and an admitted fact. He didn't consider the drawback prohibitory, I believe—what young man in love would? If it came to that, he might not even consider Vittoria's comparative destitution prohibitory; only there's no getting away from the fact that it is. Yes, I think the best and wisest advice you can give her is to break it off. Nobody but the St. Erths knows that it was ever on, and they won't talk. They'll be only too thankful to be done with it."

"How family likenesses crop up and assert themselves!" I murmured. "You probably think that no two people could be more dissimilar than you and your late brother; yet you have visible points of resemblance to him."

"What *can* you mean?" cried Mrs. Adare, in unfeigned wonder.

I was not so unfeeling as to tell her. The great pull that fundamentally selfish persons have over the rest of the world is that the very nature of their vice renders them unconscious of it. Their overmastering desire to secure their own peace and comfort is, indeed, not so much a vice as an

instinct, and I daresay neither Mr. Torrance nor Mrs. Adare had realised that they had never consulted Vittoria's peace or comfort at all. I daresay they had both thought that they had more than done their duty to her, and I could not flatter myself that the survivor of them was likely to be disturbed for more than one bewildered instant by a remark which she doubtless ascribed to my eccentricity.

CHAPTER XII

I HAD dressed for dinner and was waiting in the saloon—a very long room, somewhat scantily furnished, in compliance with the latest decrees of fashion as to such matters—when Vittoria entered, accompanied by Joshua, who punctuated each step of her advance by a joyous spring, which raised him nearly to the level of her chin. She came towards me in the half-light as quickly as he would let her, a slim black figure, round which the leaping white dog circled; and if to my searching eye her countenance exhibited traces of care, past or present, her smile was as bright as always.

“Isn’t he a dear?” she exclaimed, holding out her hand to me. “Isn’t it nice of him to be so glad? Little he cares how much his mistress has depreciated in value since he saw her last!”

“His mistress,” I hastened to return (for I could not let her force my hand at that unsuitable moment), “has depreciated rather heavily in the estimation of certain friends of hers by forgetting to write to them.”

“Oh, but it wasn’t because I forgot,” she pleaded: “it was because there were so many

things to say. One puts off letters just as often when one has too much material as when one has too little, don't you think so? You and Lydia must forgive me."

"No doubt we must, if such are your orders," I replied. "As you know, we never dream of disobeying your orders."

"Take care!" said Vittoria, laughing. "What if I were to order you, or rather entreat you—for, of course, the truth is that you have been my master, and asserted yourself as such, ever since I first stormed your studio—what if I were to entreat you to give me house-room at Mundsham again for a time?"

"Our house and all that it contains are yours," I answered. "Come back with me tomorrow, if you will, and rejoice our hearts."

She seemed pleased and relieved. She confessed that she did not yet feel quite in trim to face crowds, whereas her aunt was hard put to it to endure existence without them.

"Aunt Julia declares that she can't entertain visitors while she is in such deep mourning; but that's only a way of speaking. A few old friends are expected next week, as an advance-guard, and after them the deluge! If Aunt Julia didn't invite others, they would invite themselves. This house has always been used as an hotel; it falls below the level of its mission so long as there's a single empty bedroom in it."

Dinner being nominally at eight o'clock, Mrs. Adare bustled in, adjusting her bracelets, at twenty minutes to nine. She said it seemed almost absurd to have dinner at all when there were only three of us to sit down to it; however, it need not take long. As a matter of fact, it was quickly served, and she talked without intermission from start to finish—for which I was grateful to her. I don't know whether she was nervous and uneasy; I know I was; while Vittoria could not but be aware that I was not at Capelhurst for nothing. During our colloquy in the saloon neither she nor I had referred to the circumstance that I had been summoned; but she must have guessed that I had, and she must surely have concluded that she herself was the cause of the summons. So conversation might have flagged if Mrs. Adare had not generously spared us the effort of making any. She said that, as it was such a warm night, we would have our coffee on the terrace, and before I had half swallowed mine she retreated into the house, murmuring something indistinct about letters for the first post in the morning.

I own that I watched her flight with a craven longing to participate in it. I did not like my job in the least, nor did I know any too well how to set to work. By the faint light of the stars I could see that Vittoria, who was nursing Joshua and who was peering at me, with her chin resting upon his round head, found my—doubtless evident—discom-

future rather diverting. At length, with a low laugh, she exhorted me to "speak out and get it over."

"I know quite well what you are going to say," she added; "but I suppose you must be allowed to say it, and I'm ready to listen respectfully."

"I am afraid," I answered, "that you don't know at all."

But she persisted. "Oh, yes, I do; and I know why you have been sent for too. Poor, dear Aunt Julia! As if she hadn't been saying it herself over and over again already in a sort of perpetual song without words! Shall I put it into words for you? I am to be made to see how much more dignified it would be of me to break off my engagement at once than to wait for Lord St. Erth's veto. Isn't that it?"

"Well, perhaps that is included in my instructions," I replied. "Your aunt thinks that, under the altered conditions——"

"But if neither Ringstead nor I think so?" interrupted Vittoria. "Naturally, I offered to release him as soon as I heard how altered the conditions were; I should have thought you might have foreseen that I should do that! But he wouldn't hear of being released, and I don't mind admitting that I should have despised him if he had. After all, twenty thousand pounds is a good deal of money, isn't it?"

I was obliged to shake my head. "Not to you

and him. But it isn't only a question of money; there's something else that you ought to hear."

"What else?" she inquired, and there was a hint of nascent displeasure in her voice. "I don't think it is very likely to make me change my mind, whatever it may be."

So then, with a direct brevity which was not brutal, I hope, I told her. She laid her cheek down on Joshua's head while I was speaking, and, seeing nothing but her abundant dark hair, I could not tell how she was affected by my disclosure; but her comment upon it, when I had finished, was not at all what I had expected.

"This explains and excuses everything," she said. "I may confess now that I felt very sore about poor father's will. I couldn't see what I had done to be treated like that, any more than I could see why he was always so—so distant with me. But the truth, of course, is that he was much more generous and considerate than he need have been. I only wish I had known the truth sooner!"

So did I; but I really could not agree that Mr. Torrance had shown any sort of consideration for his daughter, even if he had done his duty to her, as perhaps he had, in the matter of pecuniary provision. We talked him over for a while, Vittoria seeming to be much more interested in the new light thrown upon his past than in the shadow which had fallen upon her own future. Her apparent indifference as to the latter might or might not

be assumed; I hardly knew what to think or what to wish. But at length I judged it best to say—

“You can understand now why Lord St. Erth may feel bound to exercise his right of veto.”

“Has he one?” she asked. “Ringstead is of age. What if we were to exercise our right to marry, without Lord St. Erth’s leave?”

“Well, if you think that Ringstead and you could live upon the interest of twenty thousand pounds,” I answered, “and if you didn’t mind estranging your husband from his family——”

She made a gesture of impatience. “The estrangement will be of their creation, not mine. I suppose you mean that I ought to look upon myself as a disgraced and humiliated being. Why should I? I have committed no sin.”

What could I say? Assuredly she had committed none; yet, by the operation of a social law which is as old as humanity, an ineradicable reproach attached to her. There is nothing that I know of to be urged in defence of such a law, nor is there the smallest use in attempting to evade it. I need not say that all my sympathies were with Vittoria; but it was best that she should recognise the strength of Lord and Lady St. Erth’s case. I must have put it with a deplorable absence of the tact which Mrs. Adare had attributed to me; for presently my hearer asked gently—

“Don’t you think you are—perhaps—just a little bit of a snob?”

"No," I replied, "I can't say that I do; I have never yet come across anybody who thought himself a snob. But no doubt you are a better judge of me than I am of myself."

"What I mean," Vittoria went on, "is that you don't consider me fit to be related to these people because they happen to belong to the nobility, for which you have a true Briton's veneration. If they had been Mr. and Mrs. Smith, it would have been quite another story."

I should have considered any Smith entitled to raise just the same objections as a descendant of the Plantagenets; but, not wishing to say so, I held my peace, and she resumed—

"Fortunately or unfortunately, Ringstead is not a snob. Of course he must know what you have just told me; yet in answering my letter he didn't even think it worth while to allude to the subject. Doesn't it strike you that that was rather fine of him?"

It struck me that any allusion to the subject on his part would have been extremely difficult; it struck me that he had avoided a great many difficulties by decamping to Scotland and leaving other people to divulge what could no longer be concealed. However, it remained true that he had resisted parental pressure and had repudiated release.

"I don't say that he has behaved badly," I acknowledged.

"But you would like to say so if you could,"

Vittoria rejoined, with a hostile intonation which was new to me; "you would like, if you could, to make out——"

The reappearance of Mrs. Adare caused her to stop short, and doubtless thereby served the interests of peace. It was in an entirely different tone of voice that she cried—

"Come along, Aunt Julia; don't be frightened! The operation is over, and the patient isn't a penny the worse. You really needn't have sent all the way to Norfolk for an expert to perform it. Now you would like your game of picquet, wouldn't you?"

Passing her arm affectionately through her aunt's, she moved towards the house, and, since I evidently was not meant to follow, I remained where I was.

"This," I forlornly reflected, as I lighted a cigar, "is what one gets by amiable intermeddling. A couple of egotists, like Mr. Torrance and Mrs. Adare, are not only forgiven but beloved, while an unfortunate friend, whose sole wish is to be at once kind and honest, is called a snob and suspected of being a foe."

I took some time over that cigar—I thought, upon the whole, I had better take some time over it—and when I went indoors, the ladies had already retired for the night.

CHAPTER XIII

I WAS called at half-past eight on the morrow and informed that breakfast would be at any hour I liked. Mrs. Adare, it seemed, sometimes came down at ten o'clock, but usually breakfasted in her own room. It was one of those still, hazy mornings which presage a hot day, yet retain something of the freshness of the night. My windows looked down upon broad stretches of lawn and garden, drenched in dew, upon silent woods, where the dark green of late summer was already relieved here and there by splashes of yellow and russet, and upon an artificial lake in the pearl-grey distance. The whole prospect had so tranquil and inviting an air that, when I had dressed, I thought I would go out for a stroll before eating anything.

I had need of whatever anodyne communion with placid Nature might succeed in bestowing upon me; for my fiasco of the previous evening remained as a bitter taste in my mouth. A very complete fiasco it had been, and the more I thought of it the more heartily I cursed myself for a dull-witted bungler. I saw now, as I ought to have seen then, that it must have galled Vittoria to be

enlightened as to a matter of such supreme importance to her by one who was not even connected with her family; I saw that she would not have received the news with that outward composure unless she had been rather deeply wounded by it; I saw that she had been perfectly justified in ascribing what I had said about the St. Erths to a desire to stop her marriage by any available means; and I likewise saw that, if I had wanted to prevent the marriage (as possibly I had), I could hardly have employed greater ingenuity towards defeating my own end. And, worst of all, I had offended her. It was doubtful now whether she would keep her promise of returning to Mundsham with me; it was doubtful whether she would ever care to resume the friendly relations which had somehow or other become an indispensable part of my life; it was pretty certain that she would never ask counsel or help of me again. Although I have perforce a large acquaintance, I am not a man who can boast of many friends or who knows how to make them easily; so that the thought of having alienated Vittoria, and alienated her entirely through my own stupidity, would have been enough to make me weep, had I belonged to one of the Latin races. Being an Anglo-Saxon, I only muttered bad language and beheaded innocent ox-eye daisies with my stick, as I strode in the direction of the lake along a woodland path which skirted the park.

Presently a small white object flitted past me

across the grass and was gone. It was Joshua, in hot pursuit of a rabbit, and, looking back, I became aware of Joshua's mistress, who had every appearance of being in pursuit of me. I stood still while the slim, sable-clad figure drew near (surely nobody outside the realms of mythology has ever covered ground so rapidly and with so little visible or unbecoming exertion as Vittoria!), and when she was close to me, I perceived, with great joy and relief, that she was no longer incensed.

"Please," she began, putting her hands together meekly, "I've come to say I'm sorry. I take it all back—every word! And of course you're not a snob."

"Oh, I don't know," I answered, laughing; for indeed at that moment the question of whether I was what she had called me or not seemed to be one of very small importance. "Perhaps I am; perhaps most of us are snobs. I am quite persuaded of the value of class distinctions; I regard peers, except some of the more recent creations, as my social superiors; I daresay I should be proud to take a peerage myself if such honours were ever conferred upon mediocre sculptors."

"I don't believe you would," returned Vittoria; "but that's not the point. The point is that I hurt you by saying you were a snob. You *were* hurt, weren't you?"

"A little," I confessed; "but then I had hurt you,"

"Not intentionally. You had a nasty dose to administer, and you poured it straight down my throat, like the dear, honest, maladroit friend that you are, instead of trying to disguise it with jam or sugar. You didn't meant to give pain, whereas I did; which makes all the difference. But I'm sorry."

She would not listen to apologies from me; there was no occasion for any, she declared. From the moment that I accepted hers, all was well. She reminded me of that day in the studio at Hampstead when she had warned me that I should never manage to quarrel with her. "But we weren't far from it last night, were we? We won't get as near it as that again."

"And you'll come back to Mundsham with me today?" I asked.

"Rather! I've arranged all about that with Aunt Julia, who longs to get rid of me. Not out of any sort of unkindness; still, as a fact, she does. Now let's go and have our breakfast."

We had proceeded some little distance towards the house when Vittoria said calmly, "I'm sure you'll be glad to hear that I've written to tell Lord Ringstead I can't possibly marry him."

"You haven't!" I exclaimed in amazement.

"Isn't that what you wanted me to do?" she asked, with a smile.

Certainly I had wanted her to do it; only she had given reasons for not doing it which had had

some effect upon me. Moreover, the young man had undeniable rights. In short, this wholly unexpected change of front perturbed me, and I avowed as much. But Vittoria begged me to make my mind easy.

"Something that you said—it wasn't of any consequence—rubbed my fur the wrong way," she explained; "so I turned and scratched. But I knew all the time that I was going to take your advice. It is much better that the engagement should be broken off at once and by me than there should be an ignoble tussle which could only end in one way."

"I am bound to confess that I think so," said I hesitatingly; "but I am afraid——"

"You needn't be. Do I look heart-broken?"

It seemed to me that she looked, on the contrary, a good deal relieved. I had never had much faith in her love for Ringstead, whom she had accepted, I thought, as women so often do accept lovers, because of his passionately declared love for her.

"Have you told your aunt?" I inquired.

"Oh, yes; I told her last night and was highly commended. Now, if you please, we aren't going to say one more word about that or any other unpleasant subject."

Mrs. Adare did not show at the breakfast-table; but she came downstairs soon afterwards, with both hands full of letters, and I had a short talk

with her in Vittoria's absence. She was loud in expressions of gratitude which I assuredly had not earned.

"You have managed it all quite beautifully," she affirmed, "and I can't tell you what a load you have taken off my mind! It's so much the best thing for the poor, dear girl to keep out of the way until people have stopped talking about her and her father's will."

"So you won't mind my carrying her off home with me?" I asked.

"Mind! My dear man, it's the very thing I should have implored you to do, if I had had the face! Take her and keep her as long as you can and will. I'm sure it's unnecessary for me to tell you that my house will always be open to her and that she will be more than welcome to make it her home until she marries; but just for the moment, you know . . . And as for that unfortunate affair with young Ringstead, it's a case of 'least said, soonest mended.' I'm so glad you got her to look at it in a reasonable light."

I suppose she did look at it in a reasonable light, though I could not claim to have been instrumental in causing her to do so. Broadly speaking, she was a reasonable person and singularly quick of apprehension. It is true that such qualities are apt to fall into abeyance when the possessor of them happens to be in love; but I felt almost positive that Vittoria was not thus handicapped.

At all events, her demeanour and conversation during our journey lent support to that conviction, and Lydia, apprised by telegram that I was bringing a guest home with me, had a warm welcome for us when we got to the end of it. The welcome might perhaps have been a shade less hearty in the case of one of us, had my sister divined what I deemed it politic to withhold from her until late at night, after Vittoria had gone to bed; for when I had succinctly laid the facts before her, she told me I ought to be ashamed of myself.

"In the first place," she began, "what business have you to take it for granted that Vittoria is not Mr. Torrance's legitimate daughter? He never said she wasn't, did he? For anything that you know, he may have married that Italian woman. Oh, well, if you like to say that his will was conclusive upon the point, so be it!—although I don't myself see anything out of the way in supposing that he behaved as he did in mere nasty spite. Anyhow, nothing is more clear to me than that a false reason is being given for wrecking the girl's happiness. It isn't on account of her birth, but because she is comparatively poor, instead of being rich, that you have all turned against her. All that is, except Lord Ringstead, who never will, you'll see."

"I'm persuaded that he never will," I answered mildly; "I won't try to persuade you that Mrs. Adare and I haven't. Only I do venture to suggest

that a man who has been definitely refused must put up with what has happened to him."

"Not if he has been definitely accepted, and if he knows quite well that the girl who has accepted him isn't a jilt," Lydia declared. "He'll hold her to her word, and she'll keep her word, and they'll both be right. You know a great many things that I don't know, Edwin, but you must forgive me for saying that you don't know much about human nature."

Little versed though I may be in that intricate subject of study, I knew enough about my sister's nature to abstain from argument with her. Her forecast was mistaken, I thought; but I was not surprised to find it so far verified that two days later there came a letter from Ringstead, vehemently rejecting rejection. The missive—so I was given to understand by its recipient—was eloquent and touching; but she did not favour me with any excerpts from it, save one, which consisted of a brief personal attack upon myself, as the presumed marplot, and which denounced me as a "time-serving old humbug."

"That," I observed, "leaves my withers unwrung. Tell him that, although I am neither old nor a humbug, I don't shrink from admitting that my humble efforts to serve my friends must change with changed times."

"You think I ought to answer him, then?" Vittoria asked.

We were out sailing together, and she had surrendered the tiller to me, so that she might have her hands free to manipulate the three or four sheets of notepaper which the intensity of her correspondent's feelings had required.

"I think you probably will," I replied; "but of course silence is always more effective than reiteration."

She nodded reflectively, as if in concurrence.

"Has he moved you at all?" I inquired, after a pause.

"No," she answered, with a shade of hesitation. And then decisively, "No; I am not going to marry him."

A gust of wind caught us, and the old boat began to tear through the water at racing speed, or something that felt like it. Vittoria took the helm once more, and neither of us spoke again for several minutes, when she turned suddenly upon me with—

"All the same, you know, he *was* awfully fond of me."

Quite so. I well remembered her having said that once before, and I thought I could understand just as well then as I had on that previous occasion what it implied. But why talk of understanding our fellow-mortals or knowing anything positive about what we are pleased to call human nature? My own experience is that those who consider themselves judges of character are peculi-

arly liable to error, because they are so prone to forget that we all give the lie to our respective characters sometimes. Vittoria's character did not appear very baffling or hard to read. I made bold to believe that I could enter into the temporarily complex sentiments by which she was swayed, and that I could in some measure foresee what the outcome of them would be, granted the (to me) certain fact that she did not love Ringstead. But she was to give me some surprises yet.

She gave me none during the remainder of our stay at Mundsham, unless her serene and evidently sincere enjoyment of resumed conditions was to be accounted as such. It may have been as incredible as Lydia said it was that the girl should be really happy; but I hardly see why my rejoinder that she was at all events making me so was to be stigmatised as "heartless."

"Why this acrimony?" I asked. "Your theory, I believe, is that I am myself so profoundly and hopelessly enamoured of Vittoria as not to care what may happen to her so long as she doesn't marry or engage herself to somebody else. As a theory, it does no great credit to your insight; but, admitting it, you might surely let me capture what joy I can from the fleeting hours. Mayn't a poor dog have his day?"

Well, I had my day. Or rather, I had many benign autumn days by sea and land, in the course of which Vittoria and I confabulated endlessly

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without wearying one another. Certain topics were tacitly ruled out of order; if she had made any plans for her future, she did not refer to them, nor was she interrogated by me. She did, however, intimate that she intended to take up her lessons in modelling again.

"You think I shall never be anything but a duffer," she remarked once, "and I suppose you ought to know. Nevertheless, you must put up with me as a pupil, for it has come to this that I can't do without you."

"And I am beginning to think," I returned, "that I can't do without you either."

Then I laughed a little at the thought of what our literal Lydia would have said or done if she could have heard us.

CHAPTER XIV

EXCEPTIONALLY protracted as that warm season was, it forsook us at last in a wild confusion of wind and cold rain which our exposed dwelling was ill equipped to withstand. When the weather breaks after that fashion in the first week of October one knows what to expect. Moreover, London and work were crying aloud for me. So one day we all flitted to Hampstead—"all" including Vittoria, who consented to remain with us until her aunt should return home from paying a series of visits. She had told me in confidence that, for several reasons, she did not wish to make her permanent home with Mrs. Adare, and did I think that she was too poor or too young to live by herself? Poverty is, of course, a relative term; but I took it that she could quite well afford to have a small house of her own. The obstacle of immature years, however, looked rather more serious. I could scarcely think that Mrs. Adare would sanction such an arrangement.

"Only she isn't my guardian, you see," Vittoria quietly observed, "and I am not sure that she can even be called my aunt any longer. That sort of relationship doesn't count, does it?"

It was from such occasional speeches—they were

few and far between—that I inferred the existence of a soreness which I could say nothing to lessen. What I could perchance do in a professional capacity was to provide my pupil with one of those enduring interests in life which are the shield and buckler of Fortune's victims. I therefore set myself to that task with a will, and I will leave the reader to imagine how deep was my disgust when, on coming in from the studio, after a hard morning's work, I found Ringstead seated with my sister. It was hardly playing the game, and I fixed a grave, upbraiding stare upon Lydia, who met it with calm effrontery. As for the young man himself, he exhibited neither embarrassment nor ill-humour and had doubtless forgotten what he had called me in a certain letter to a third person.

"Back to the mill again, eh?" he asked genially. "Chipping away at your old busts and things? I hear you had a ripping fine autumn down in Norfolk. So had we in Scotland."

He began to chatter about deerstalking as unconcernedly as if he had not known very well that I was wishing him at the devil, and the meeting between him and Vittoria, who presently entered, was a study in facial expression—or rather the absence of it—on both sides. They exchanged a friendly shake of the hand, followed by sundry colourless remarks; only a very slight lift of Vittoria's brows at the first moment told me, to my satisfaction, that this encounter had not been expected by her.

Lydia's doing, then, obviously. I promised myself to give Lydia such a wiggling later as she should not forget in a hurry.

Of course Ringstead honoured us with his company at luncheon. He likewise honoured the cook by partaking of the dishes set before him with appetite and appreciation. The conversation, which was general, was well sustained throughout, considering that each one of us must have been thinking the whole time about matters in no way connected with those which kept our tongues employed; but if we all behaved nicely, the highest standard of merit was perhaps attained by Ringstead, who could not have been the least sure of what awaited him, yet who managed to talk and look as if he were waiting for nothing. He waited in the dining-room after the ladies had left it, though, and, having accepted a cigarette from me, opened fire in a style which was manly and straightforward enough.

"Now look here, Trathan," said he, "I'm not going to be such an ass as to quarrel with you, though I don't suppose you'll deny that you've been putting spokes in my wheel. I've no doubt you mean well, and all that; but this is my business, and I can't see that it's anybody else's business, except Vittoria's."

"Your father's?" I hazarded.

"To some extent, yes." He laughed, with a wry mouth, as he added, "Not to mention my mother's; but it isn't——"

"It isn't mine?"

"Well—how can it be? You've been a good friend to Vittoria, I know, and she thinks a lot of what you say; still that doesn't quite give you the right to dispose of her life, does it?"

Conscious of the weakness of my position, I could only assert that a friend is entitled to give advice when he is asked to do so, and I was proceeding to put forward some very good reasons why I could not advise Vittoria in the sense that he desired when he cut me short.

"I won't have it, that's all," he declared good-humouredly. "I won't have anybody coming between her and me. I thought I'd just tell you."

So there he stood, with his feet planted upon firm ground, finely representative of the best traditions of his class. I, by way of contrast, had neither a word to say nor a leg to stand upon, and it only remained for me to effect a speedy retreat to the studio. I intimated a while ago that I do not set up to be a judge of human nature or of individual character; yet I had had my own rather strong impression with regard to Ringstead—a cheery, shallow, pleasure-loving youth who would never find much difficulty in substituting Ninette for Ninon—so it was disconcerting to have to own that my sister had taken his measure more accurately than I. It was disconcerting, and it was wholly depressing; for, however wide of the mark I might have been in other respects, I could not

believe that I had been wrong in doubting whether Vittoria would have any chance at all of happiness as his wife. She had, it was true, extraordinary powers of ingratiation, and, at the very best, she might contrive to avert an open split with Lady St. Erth; but, at the very best, her position would be a false one; at the very best, she would be bound for life to a man with whom even now she had little save youth in common. There was, of course, the possibility of her maintaining her refusal; but I did not rely much upon that. The fellow's case was too strong. "You told me that you loved me; you gave me your word; I haven't changed. What excuse have you for changing, except that in the matter of birth and fortune you aren't quite what you thought you were? If I dismiss such considerations as beneath notice, surely you may!" Surely she would! The only conclusive reply for her to make would be that, after all, she did not love the suppliant; and if I knew anything of Vittoria, such a reply would be well-nigh impossible to her.

I worked on doggedly for a couple of hours, auguring ill from the circumstance that I was left for that length of time without interruption; but at last Vittoria joined me, as I felt sure she would, and a glance at her deprecating, faintly smiling face sufficed.

"Well," I said, perhaps rather roughly, "it's all on again, I suppose?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no; it isn't on again. But what could I do? He simply wouldn't listen!"

"Has he been declining to listen all this time?" I inquired.

"Yes, most of the time," she answered, with a forlorn laugh. "The intervals were filled up with reproaches, to which I had to listen, because I couldn't deny that I had earned them." She added, after a pause, "You see, I *did* tell him that I cared for him."

Vittoria had seated herself upon the one available chair. I hastily washed my hands in the tin basin which is kept near me for that purpose and placed myself in a commanding attitude, facing her.

"What you may have told him away back in the summer is very little to the point," said I. "The question is—do you love him now?"

I had to wait a full minute for an evasive reply.

"I didn't mean to think any more about him," Vittoria said. "I didn't want to see him again, and I had no idea that he would come here. It was Lydia who wrote to him, without consulting me. But I do feel that it is rather magnificent of him to be so constant, in spite of everything. Don't you feel that yourself?"

It was atrociously magnificent of him; but, not caring to make any such admission, I merely grunted, while Vittoria resumed—

"And yet I don't believe he realises in the least

what our marrying would imply. I don't think he would at all like being poor."

"I don't think you would either," I remarked.

"Well, I can't say; I've never tried. I fancy that I shouldn't mind much. But for him to give up hunting and shooting and all the other expensive things that he delights in!" . . .

"He wouldn't," I observed; "such heroic measures would be inconceivable to him. His father would have to pay, if anybody did."

"Ah, precisely, his father! I entrenched myself behind Lord and Lady St. Erth, who are furious, he confesses. I can't be expected to brave their fury, nor even to attempt to appease it."

"Certainly you cannot," I agreed, beginning to breathe a little more freely. "Well?"

"Well, he is to go down to Cornwall tonight, and I am to hear in a day or two how he has sped. He thinks they will give in when they find that he is in earnest."

"He is over sanguine, I suspect," said I; "but time will show. Meanwhile, may I ask whether you have conditionally promised to marry him?"

Vittoria hesitated. No; she did not remember having committed herself to any actual promise. "But you don't know how difficult it was! What would you think of me if Joshua licked my hand and I kicked him across the room in return?"

I delivered a homily which I refrain from inflicting upon the reader. Every word of it was sound

and true and applicable to the case; but it was not, I fear, just what was wanted at the particular moment. Vittoria received it submissively, essayed no rejoinder, then, looking a little dazed and tired, announced that she was going to take a walk across the Heath "to get rid of the cobwebs." Her exit was effected with a precipitancy eloquent of her eagerness to get rid of her mentor. That I had disappointed her was clear; that I had made a mistake in being harsh, instead of sympathetic, with her was probable. But how is one to hit upon the right way of dealing with people whom one would do anything in the world to serve, yet who appear to be in the painful predicament of not knowing their own minds?

Vittoria had not left me much more than five minutes when a visitor strolled in who was competent, or thought himself so, to reply to that question. A few hours before, I should have been distinctly annoyed to see Garforth; now, in my perplexity, I was ready to welcome him; for he was a man of experience and resource, and at least he did not wish Vittoria to marry Ringstead.

He had just arrived, he told me, from his "Highland shanty"; that being his modest way of qualifying a castle, with I know not how many square miles of moor and deer-forest attached to it. He had not come across Ringstead in those regions, but had heard of him and had likewise heard all about the demise and testamentary dispositions of

Mr. Torrance. With regard to the latter, he was of opinion that, although cruel, inasmuch as Vittoria had been deliberately left unprepared for them, they would so far benefit her as to give the death-blow to a preposterous matrimonial project.

"But the worst of it is that they haven't!" I groaned. And then, while he sat astride the chair which Vittoria had vacated, with his arms folded upon the back and a very big cigar in his mouth, I told him what had occurred during the previous few weeks, winding up with an account of the day's vexatious events.

"It's quite normal, all this," he observed tranquilly, when I had done.

"I like it none the better if it is," I returned.

"Nor I; but it's only what was to be expected. That youngster is a gentleman, I take it, if there isn't much more to him. This little irregularity of birth strikes me as immaterial; personally, I shouldn't feel any more ashamed of it than I should feel proud of being descended from William the Conqueror. But I can understand that to him and you and quite a number of people it might imply a grave sort of blemish. Added to which there's the loss of fortune. A gentleman couldn't accept release. Not even if his family thought it was his duty."

"If his family can't stop it, she will marry him," I predicted.

Garforth did not answer at once. He was holding up one of his broad, brown hands and frowning at it meditatively. "Oh, she won't marry him," he said, after a moment or two, with a slight smile, as though that much were at all events certain; "I never meant she should marry him."

The words look ridiculous; but somehow they did not sound so, and fugitive impressions of the log and the stork, the frying-pan and the fire, flitted across my troubled mind.

"What I should mean the poor girl to do, if I had the audacity to talk like that," I remarked rather irritably, "would be to please herself."

Garforth laughed and got up. "By your own account, Trathan," he observed, "that isn't quite the idea that you've been trying to convey to her mind this afternoon. Women are queer to drive. They must know you hold the reins; but you've got to let them have their heads—let them have their heads all the time."

"I don't hold the reins," I said.

"Well, if you're not driving, you're not responsible. My own surmise is that Lord and Lady St. Erth hold rather too strong a suit for their son; but we shall see. Miss Vittoria has gone out for a walk, you say? Shall I find Miss Lydia if I go into the house and ask for a cup of tea?"

"I believe you will," I answered. "I don't offer to accompany you, because I can't trust myself to speak to my sister yet. It was all her doing that

Ringstead came here today and upset everything. But for that, silence might have had its perfect work."

"I'll talk seriously to her about it," Garforth promised, nodding, as he took himself off.

CHAPTER XV

WE had a few people dining with us uncere-
moniously that evening—Arthur Belton, the artist,
and his wife, together with one or two other old
friends whose habitual orbit did not cross that of
Adares, Ringsteads or St. Erths. In the somewhat
electric condition of our atmosphere their presence
would, I felt, be doubly welcome; for although
I wanted to castigate Lydia, and it was my duty so
to do, I never really want to arouse a storm. Not
one of our guests, I was pretty sure, had ever heard
of Vittoria, and it was pleasantly apparent, on their
arrival, that none of them ever had.

Pleasant also was it to note the quick facility of
her victory over them all. To her beauty they could
not be insensible; she had recovered her spirits;
and if these new acquaintances did not interest her
particularly—but most likely they did, for she was
always interested in new acquaintances—she be-
haved in such a manner as to imbue them with the
most flattering beliefs. I doubt whether Vittoria
used conscious efforts, on that or any other occa-
sion, to subjugate her interlocutors; but I don't
at all doubt that their subjugation was agreeable
to her, and her success had, amongst other for-

tunate results, that of causing the silence of her host (who was not in the very best of humours), to pass unnoticed. One half-comic, half-annoying episode occurred, to be sure, towards the end of dinner, when Belton called out—

“Oh, by the way, Trathan, did you hear a report that your Yankee millionaire is going to be married?”

“Which of my Yankee millionaires?” I asked.

“I beg your pardon; I forgot that the whole crowd came to you to have their features perpetuated in marble or bronze. I meant Garforth, the only one who deigns to recognise the struggling likes of me. They say the young woman of his affections has refused him once; but that’s merely incidental; he isn’t the man to take a refusal from anybody. An awfully good-looking girl; though there’s something queer about her, I forget what.”

The eyes of the awfully good-looking girl with something queer about her met mine for a flash and were instantly averted. She was only tickled, I was glad to see. Belton went on, scratching his stupid head—

“What on earth was her name? I know I was told.”

Then on a sudden his jaw dropped, he became ruddier than the cherry, and was seized with such a violent fit of choking that he had to get up and stamp about the room.

Well, it really did not matter. The news of

Garforth's rumoured intentions was no news to me; yet it gave me just that added sense of discomfort which attaches to confirmation of an unwelcome fact. It did not in the least discompose Vittoria, who was, if anything, more charming than before with Belton during the remainder of the evening. I strongly suspect that he had her in mind when he produced that graceful little study of a female head, entitled "The Ideal," which was so deservedly praised by the critics and admired by the public last spring.

Lydia, when at length she and I were left face to face, took all the sting out of my deferred rebuke by acknowledging, with a humility most unusual in her, that she had done wrong.

"I now see that I oughtn't to have asked Lord Ringstead to come here without saying anything to Vittoria. The excuse is that if I had told her, she wouldn't have let me write, and then perhaps they wouldn't have met again at all."

"Oh, if you call that an excuse!" said I.

"I think I may be allowed to call it a reason, anyhow," returned Lydia, still quite meekly. "Of course, all turns upon whether they love one another or not."

I denied that that was the sole question at issue, adducing in support of my denial, circumstances which were beyond dispute. "But even if it were," I went on, "the answer, I am almost certain, would be in the negative, so far as Vittoria is concerned.

All you have done for her is to put her in an especially painful dilemma."

Lydia sighed and knitted her brows. "So Mr. Garforth says; but——"

"Oh, it was Garforth who brought you to a more chastened frame of mind, was it?" I asked. "I thought as much!"

"He spoke very sensibly," answered Lydia; "he always does. I don't know that I altogether agree with him, and I certainly can't change my opinions just because they happen to differ from his; only—I have a sort of feeling that one can rely upon him."

"I have a sort of feeling that he wants to marry Vittoria himself," I remarked.

"Oh, yes, I know," laughed Lydia. "That was sure to be said, and your friend Mr. Belton must needs say it to Vittoria's face. As for you, you think everybody wants to marry her."

"No doubt an appreciable number of persons do," I replied. "As I am not myself one of the number, it might perhaps be wiser of you to consult me than others before you take any more liberties with her destiny. But I know you won't."

Lydia did not promise to consult me; but she did undertake—probably she had already given Garforth an undertaking—to refrain from further interference. She had in truth achieved about as much mischief as was possible, and we could only await the results of her handiwork.

A species of unformulated truce of twenty-four hours' duration enabled us all to show how sincerely affectionate and respectful were the sentiments that we entertained for one another, so long as a sense of duty or malign outside influences did not set us by the ears. Vittoria, who worked hard all day under my supervision, was as dexterous with her fingers as she was in her speech; Lydia was gentle and conciliatory; while I was, I trust, appreciative of sundry small attentions which might well be considered my due. But on the succeeding morning came the inevitable postman, and I had not been many minutes in the studio before Vittoria stepped in, with a troubled face, and handed me an open letter.

"From Lady St. Erth," she said. "You had better read it. It isn't very pleasant."

It was not at all pleasant. Nevertheless, it was, after a fashion, kind, and one could perceive that the writer had honestly tried to make it as little wounding or offensive as might be. But of course what Lady St. Erth had to say did not admit of much softening down. Stripped of periphrases, it amounted to this: "The condition of our affairs makes it imperative that our son should marry money. Even had you possessed a large or a moderate fortune, the unhappy stain upon your birth would have prevented Lord St. Erth and me from welcoming you as our daughter-in-law. Matters being as they are, you are out of the

question, and I gather that you yourself began by recognising this. Now, however, we are given to understand by our son that you are ready to marry him if our consent can be obtained. That consent we shall not and cannot give; yet he declares that he intends to make you his wife, with or without it. Since he is of age, he is legally entitled, it is true, to form a connection which could only be ruinous in every acceptance of the term; but I would fain hope that you are neither so wicked nor so foolish as he represents, and I therefore write" . . . etc., etc.

"Are you going to answer this?" I asked, as I folded up the sheet.

Vittoria, with a doleful little smile, shook her head. "It's too desperately unanswerable! But—there's another letter, you see, which I *must* answer."

Naturally, she did not offer to show me that one; but she gave me its purport. Ringstead appeared to have said the sort of things which one could hardly blame him for saying, although it was extremely provoking and (by me, at any rate) rather unexpected of him to do so. Nobody and nothing should part him from the girl whom he loved; he didn't a bit mind being poor; he was willing and eager to live with her upon a crust; as for his parents, they would have to accept an accomplished fact, whether they liked it or not. And so forth. Really there ought to be some law

to meet cases of that description. If hot-blooded young men could be kept under restraint for a period of, say, two years after they first proclaimed their intention of contracting an inexpedient alliance—though a twelvemonth would more than suffice in most instances—any amount of gratuitous misery would be averted. I said something of the kind, and Vittoria seemed to agree with me. She demurred, however, to my suggestion that she should at once sit down and give Ringstead his quietus by letter.

"I don't feel as if I could!" she murmured. "You won't understand, I suppose, but—but I can't bear hurting people!"

"All very fine," said I, "but how are you to help it? You can't marry more than one man; the law won't allow you. Well, suppose half a dozen unfortunates are dying for love of you? At least five of them have got to be hurt, haven't they?"

Vittoria sighed. "I shouldn't have told them that I loved them, though," she pleaded.

Evidently what stuck in her gorge was that she had made that unlucky admission to Ringstead. Perhaps this was only right and natural; still, a mistake cannot be made any the less a mistake by persistence in it.

I said: "Never mind what you told him. He shouldn't have been in such a hurry, nor should you. From the first I was convinced in my own mind that you didn't really care for him."

"But I did," she declared, looking me straight in the eyes and speaking in accents of some displeasure: "I cared a great deal for him. And I do still."

"Then you will hardly have the heart to marry him, I should think," was my not very felicitous rejoinder.

It was not felicitous, and I don't understand women, and I ought to know better than to lose my temper with them on account of generic attributes which they can't escape. All this I penitently admit, but I don't even now know what Vittoria expected me to say. What she herself said with a good deal of vehemence was—

"I don't want to marry him; I don't want to marry anybody! I wish with all my heart that the institution of marriage were abolished! But I'm between the devil and the deep sea!"

She wheeled round brusquely, and would have been out of the room in another moment if I had not intercepted her.

"Vittoria," I stammered, "I'm sorry—I'm afraid I was brutal. But you know" . . .

"Oh, I know," she interrupted, laughing and tapping me on the shoulder. "You are out of patience with me, and no wonder! You can't see the sense of fumbling over a tangled knot when one snick with a pair of scissors is all that's wanted. Well, it's just possible that I may get some help from Mr. Garforth, who is coming to take me for a walk this afternoon."

"He is, is he?" said I, not best pleased, I must confess. "What kind of help is he likely to give you, I wonder? He can offer you an alternative, no doubt, and I daresay he will."

But Vittoria smilingly made a gesture of dissent.

"Oh, not today; he is too wise for that."

What might be the depth and extent of Garforth's wisdom I could only conjecture; but he certainly seemed to possess that comprehension of the other sex in which I have acknowledged that I am personally deficient. He called soon after three o'clock, I was told—I did not see him myself, not very much wanting to see him—and he and Vittoria walked off across the Heath together, with Lydia's sanction and approval. It was Lydia who informed me of this when I went in to tea. She added that the promenaders had returned, and that she thought, upon the whole, Vittoria couldn't do better than follow Mr. Garforth's advice.

"What was his advice?" I inquired.

"Well, he thinks that she shouldn't meet Lord Ringstead again for the present."

"I'm quite with him there; but what answer did he advise her to make to the young man?"

"That I can't say; he may have advised her not to answer at all. But there was the chance of Lord Ringstead's turning up here tomorrow——"

"In fact, that's what you invited him to do?"

"At any rate, I am to telegraph to him and say that Vittoria has left us."

"She is going to leave us, then?"

"She is to return to her aunt tomorrow. Mr. Garforth thought it would be best."

"Admirable Mr. Garforth!" I exclaimed. "I haven't a word to say against his scheme, which has obvious merits and the merits of the obvious, nor am I at all surprised at its acceptance by a young woman who wants to blow hot and cold, with a mental bias in favour of cold. Whether he is as disinterested as he sounds the future must reveal; but I repeat that his success with Vittoria doesn't surprise me. What does strike me as very remarkable indeed, Lydia, is that he should have succeeded in hypnotising you."

"He hasn't hypnotised me," Lydia affirmed, plucking up a little spirit; "he hasn't hypnotised me a bit. I still think that those two are in love with one another, and I still hope that they will come together some day. All Mr. Garforth has done has been to convince me that I ought not to let this house be used as a place of meeting for them."

"It's a pity," I could not help observing, "that he didn't bring that sane conviction home to your mind some months ago, when it was being pressed in vain upon you by your brother."

CHAPTER XVI

"You are in great haste to shake our dust off your feet," I remarked at breakfast the next morning, while Vittoria's trunks were being carried out to the four-wheeler which awaited her at the door.

Her excuse was that she had several absolutely necessary things to do in London and that it would not be worth while to go down there and return, only to leave again immediately afterwards. She was to deposit her luggage at the station, and her maid was to follow her thither in the course of the afternoon. I was a little sceptical with regard to those alleged errands; still her anxiety to quit the premises was not incomprehensible. It was quite upon the cards that Lydia's telegram to Ringstead might have produced the contrary effect to that intended and that he might have come raging up from Cornwall by the night mail. Vittoria seemed to hint at some such apprehension when she said hesitatingly—

"I don't think I shall be long with Aunt Julia, and perhaps—just for the present—it would be as well if you didn't know my address afterwards."

"The fact that I knew it wouldn't deter me for

one moment from saying that I couldn't give it," I observed. But to that invitation she made no response.

At the last moment she begged me to be so kind as to keep Joshua for her until I should receive further instructions. She could not very well take him with her to shops and places, she said, and she did not want him to be placed under the care of Porter, the maid, whom, as I knew, he particularly disliked. "And he loves you; so he won't mind my deserting him."

He minded very much indeed. He had been visibly depressed ever since he had seen the luggage brought downstairs; he must have guessed that he was going to be left behind, for he was now seated, humped up, on the doorstep, shivering a little and gazing at his mistress with eyes of mute despair, and, after she had given him a farewell embrace, he made no attempt to follow her. Only when the cab had driven off he threw up his nose and let out one low howl. Then, with dropped tail and ears, he trotted meekly into the studio at my heels, and in that empty place we confided to one another that we were both pretty miserable.

Oh, wise Joshua, whose instinct or intelligence had told him what should have been manifest to any human being of average reasoning powers! Why had Vittoria burdened herself with a pile of trunks which Porter might just as well have taken to the station in the afternoon? Why had she

been upon the verge of tears all through breakfast ? Why had she parted from her dog, who, as a matter of fact, always did accompany her on shopping and other expeditions ? I suppose, if I had been a terrier, I should have smelt a rat. All I can say is that, being a mere man, and a somewhat dull-witted one to boot, I didn't. Nor did Lydia ; though, to be sure, she afterwards claimed to have had suspicions. I am afraid the truth was that I was thinking more about myself than about Vittoria. Or rather, I was thinking about her only in relation to my forsaken self. Affection, I do believe, is a selfish sentiment, notwithstanding all the fine things that have been said and written to the contrary. If we attach ourselves to some fellow-mortal, if that beloved fellow-mortal grows indispensable to us, it is not because we are animated by abstract benevolence towards him or her, nor can a sincere desire for his or her happiness console us for being debarred from participating in it. What Vittoria's future was to be I could not even surmise ; but it was borne in upon me that we had had the last of our pleasant days together and that the studio would hear her voice and her light laughter no more. So Joshua and I thought we wouldn't go in to luncheon, neither of us happening to be hungry.

Garforth came to tea ; which, all things considered, was altruistic of him. I found him conferring with Lydia over the fire, and he was so good as to say

that we had done right in restoring our late guest to her aunt's protection.

"Right or wrong," I answered—for the man was beginning to get on my nerves—"we didn't do it. You seem to have taken charge; so yours must be the credit or the blame."

"Well," said Garforth placidly, "I'm content to leave it at that."

He left the subject at that, and began to discourse fluently about Rodin and modern French sculpture. I remember that I did not find myself in agreement with all that he said; but that was no reason why Lydia should derisively accuse me of being jealous of him after he had left. Jealous!—well, of course I was not jealous in the way that she meant; but that I was a little distrustful of him and a little envious of him I will not deny.

I might have distrusted somebody else, and so might Lydia, if either of us had had any sense; but, amazing as it now seems to me, we did not even draw the palpable inference when, just as we were finishing dinner, a telegram was brought to me from Mrs. Adare.

"Vittoria not arrived yet. Maid thought she had taken an earlier train. Is she with you?"

We were both of us startled and alarmed; but we both jumped to the conclusion that an accident had happened. It was not until I had rushed off to Charing Cross Station (for I knew not where to seek nor of whom to make inquiry) and had ascertained

that no luggage had been left there by Miss Torrance during the day—it was not until then, I am ashamed to say, that the truth revealed itself to me all of a sudden. I went back home, and to my sister's eager question of whether I had heard anything I made dejected reply—

“Nothing; but I've found out everything. That is, everything that we're likely to find out yet awhile. There has been no accident; of course, if there had been one, we should have been informed of it long before this. Vittoria's disappearance is a voluntary, premeditated affair. It seems scarcely possible that Ringstead has had a hand in it; I only hope Garforth hasn't.”

“My dear Edwin,” expostulated Lydia, “have you forgotten that Mr. Garforth was in this house after five o'clock? I am quite certain that he has no more notion what has become of Vittoria than you have.”

“Well, I'm not,” I returned. “Anyhow, I shall look him up the first thing in the morning.”

However, I was not able to do that; for early morning brought me an urgent telegraphic summons from Mrs. Adare which I felt constrained to obey. Some measures, I presumed, would have to be taken to trace the fugitive, and a preliminary conference with her aunt was at least preferable to informing the police, which was the course rather absurdly advocated by Lydia.

Arriving at Capelhurst just before the luncheon

hour, I became disagreeably aware that the house was full of guests. They occupied the hall in great strength, and some of them, recognising me, began to put inconvenient questions. Wasn't I going to stay? What!—had I come all the way down from London in that beastly weather only to lunch? On some special errand, then, of course? Whether they knew or guessed anything I could not tell; but I was determined that they should get nothing out of me, and I was making some feeble rejoinder about distance not counting in these days of tubes and taxi-cabs (though in truth I had utilised neither) when the butler beckoned me away.

Mrs. Adare, into whose presence I was at once ushered, was sitting at a writing-table, littered with correspondence, and presented her usual appearance of being slightly worsted in a race with time. She said—

“My dear man, this is too good of you! And really it's too bad of Vittoria to give us all such a fright! What she means by it, and what's going to come of it, goodness only knows; but at least it's some comfort to hear that she hasn't been kidnapped or murdered. This came about an hour ago. How does it strike you?”

She handed me a foreign telegram which, I noticed, had been despatched from Bordeaux that morning, and which I proceeded to read aloud.

“Safe and sound, but had to get out of England.

Please dismiss Porter with two months' wages. Writing to send cheque and explain.—Vittoria."

"She promises to explain," I observed.

"She could hardly do less," returned Mrs. Adare, in an aggrieved voice; "but no explanation can possibly excuse such an escapade. I can only suppose that she must be running away from young Ringstead. Utterly unnecessary and uncalled for, one would have thought!"

It was conceivable, I remarked, that Vittoria might take a different view, and I then gave a brief narration of recent occurrences, which, however, I judged it best not to complicate by any allusion to Garforth.

"Well, but she can't be allowed to hide herself in France all alone," Mrs. Adare remonstrated. "It's so tiresome and inconsiderate of her! If she had told me she wanted to go abroad, I would have taken her."

"Only then Ringstead might have followed you," I said. "I'm only guessing; I'm as much in the dark as you are; but it seems to me that we had better wait for her explanation. In fact, there's nothing else to be done. You don't want to raise a hue and cry, I take it."

That was the last thing that Mrs. Adare wished to do. It was, indeed, the one thing that she most ardently desired to avoid doing. Everybody in the house knew that Vittoria had mysteriously failed to appear on the previous evening; that could not have

been concealed from them in any case, inasmuch as they would have heard of it from their respective maids if they had not been told by their hostess. But they need not, and must not, hear that she had surreptitiously taken the key of the fields.

"We'll tell them," Mrs. Adare said, "that she was called away in a great hurry and that she is with friends in France. That may even be true; for she has lots of French friends, I believe. Then, if you don't mind stretching a point for once and committing yourself to a tiny fib—quite a pardonable and beneficent little thing—we may put a stop to gossip which would be sure to do the silly girl a great deal of harm in the future. I shall have to find another place for that Porter woman. Two months' wages won't keep her from chattering; but I daresay she'll have the wit to see that she had better not give me any cause to complain of her."

At luncheon—which meal it was obviously impossible for me to shirk—I told the required lie. I am a poor liar, and I doubt whether I was believed; but I tried to look ingenuous when I said how sorry I was that, in the hurry and confusion of Miss Torrance's departure for the Continent, I had clean forgotten to allay her aunt's natural anxiety by telegraphing. There was just this to support my lame story that everybody who is acquainted with me knows how prone I am to leave undone the things which I ought to do. For the rest, it was a matter of relatively small importance to me what

those ladies and gentlemen might think. Much more to the purpose was it to find out, if I could, what I myself was to think, and with that end in view I hastened to take leave of Mrs. Adare. She promised to let me hear as soon as her niece's letter should reach her.

"But," she characteristically added, "so long as Vittoria doesn't get herself talked about, I daresay the wisest plan will be to let her alone for a time. When one comes to think of it, she can't be literally alone. Somebody or other must be giving her shelter."

Garforth was not at his rooms in the Albany when I called there, nor was he in any of the three clubs where I made subsequent application. It did not follow, to be sure, that he was on his way to Bordeaux; but I was tired and wet (it had been raining more or less all day) and I had got into that state of irritable depression when anything seems likely, provided that it is bad enough.

Reaching home after dark, I came upon Ringstead in the act of leaving the house. He was somewhat flushed, as also was Lydia, who had the air of having followed him to the door with propitiatory intentions.

"Oh, is that you, Trathan?" said he. "You've been seeing Mrs. Adare, haven't you? I suppose she knows no more than we do?"

"She has had a telegram," I rather reluctantly admitted, "but——"

"So have we," struck in Lydia; "a telegram from Bordeaux, of all odd places! It only says that she is safe and that she will write."

I mentioned that Mrs. Adare's telegram had been worded in identical terms; whereat Ringstead growled.

"I tell you plainly, Trathan," he said, "that I don't think I ought to have been treated like this. I've done a lot and sacrificed a lot." . . . His voice broke, and he cleared it. "But never mind that. What I mean to say is that there was no need to fly the country. If Miss Torrance has changed her mind and wants to be quit of me, all she had to do was to say so. I shouldn't have thrust myself upon her. It isn't only breaking faith with me, it's making a confounded fool of me—and, I must say, of herself into the bargain. At least, that's how I look at it. Sorry Miss Trathan thinks me unreasonable and unmannerly, but I can't admit that I'm either. Well, good evening."

"Perhaps it's best that he should take it in that way," I observed, after I had accompanied my sister to the fireside.

"It depends upon what one may wish the final outcome to be," she returned. "I was obliged to scold Lord Ringstead because I felt bound to stand up for Vittoria; but he has every right to be angry. Even you will allow that she has treated him very badly."

"She has treated us all badly," I said.

"Well, yes. He has much more to complain of than we have, though. As he says, she has made him ridiculous. He has practically quarrelled with his people, it seems—and all for the sake of a girl who runs away from him!"

"Perhaps she didn't run away from him," I suggested; "perhaps she only ran away from herself. In spite of Horace, the thing can be done. Garforth may have pointed out to her how easily it could be done."

But Lydia would not have that theory at any price. "My dear Edwin," she protested, "you yourself heard what Mr. Garforth's advice to her was. Why she didn't act upon it I can't think; but I am sure it wasn't because he proposed an elopement to her. If you weren't so blinded by—oh, very well, then, I won't call it jealousy; but if you weren't blinded by preconceived ideas, you would see that, supposing Mr. Garforth wanted to marry Vittoria, he could have no imaginable motive for eloping with her."

"May you be right!" I sighed. "I shall be delighted to make you and him an ample apology when you are proved so."

CHAPTER XVII

WELL, I had to exonerate Garforth. I went to his rooms on the following afternoon, and whom should I find there, smoking fraternally with him, but Ringstead! The young man jumped up as I entered, greeted me rather coldly, and, saying he must be off, promptly suited the action to the word. It was not surprising that he should harbour a grudge against me, seeing that I had not concealed my opposition to him of late; but that he should be, as he evidently was, upon the best of terms with one who not only had more valid reasons for opposing him, but was likely to turn out a far more formidable opponent, seemed a trifle ironical.

"So Miss Vittoria has given you all the slip, I hear," Garforth tranquilly remarked.

He was stroking Joshua, who had accompanied me and who had trotted straight up to him, feebly wagging a dejected tail, as if in mute appeal for sympathy. It must, I suppose, be accounted to Garforth's credit that Joshua was always friendly with him, and, indeed, I had never said or thought that he was not an honest sort of man in the main, though I may have had some doubts as to his being a rigidly scrupulous one.

"Have you heard that for the first time from

Ringstead?" I asked. "Did he come here to tell you?"

"Why no," answered Garforth, with his slow smile. "Lord Ringstead looked in this morning upon much the same errand that has brought you, I imagine. He honoured me by lunching with me at my club; then we strolled along back, and he poured out his sorrows and wrongs. He'll survive them; he isn't badly hurt."

"It would be quite the same thing to me if he were," I unfeelingly returned. "I have only a certain amount of pity at command, and I can't waste any of it upon him just now. What I want to know is whether this extraordinary move of Miss Torrance's is due to any suggestion of yours."

Garforth looked amused. "I thought that was what you would want to know," said he. "Well, I didn't suggest that she should hide herself in France, if that's what you mean. My suggestion was that she should get somewhere out of reach of a man whom she doesn't want to marry and doesn't like to jilt. If she thinks the only sure way of doing that is to get out of everybody's reach, I don't know that she's mistaken."

For my part, I could not think such a proceeding prudent or even safe. Unless, indeed, she should have taken refuge with some French friends, as her aunt seemed to think that she might have done.

"That's possible," Garforth assented, "but it

don't sound to me likely. French people are mighty straitlaced; they wouldn't hear of withholding a young lady's address from her family. And Miss Vittoria isn't going to notify you or anybody else of her address. If she did, her flight wouldn't have any sense to it. No one would have objected to her paying a visit on the Continent."

Nothing could be more self-evident, nor could anything, to my sense, be more disquieting. But Garforth was not in the least disquieted. He saw no reason why a beautiful and unprotected girl should not roam over Europe all by herself. In fact, a niece of his was just then doing that very thing.

"She writes me that she has been having a lovely time, travelling through Russia, and she expects to come to this country soon. What is there against it? It isn't her fault that her mother's dead and that her father has to attend to business in New York. This is her second trip to Europe, and she has visited Spain, Portugal, Greece——"

"Oh, yes, I daresay," I interrupted, not being much interested in the peregrinations of Garforth's niece. "We all know that American young ladies are an unfettered race, and I am willing to believe that a special Providence watches over them; but I'm afraid I can't feel confident that a similar protection is extended to the maidens of this hemisphere."

"Don't worry," said Garforth, still smiling and

continuing to stroke Joshua, who appeared to derive more solace from his caresses than I did from his remarks. "Unless I've misjudged Miss Vittoria, she can take care of herself, and I'll pay myself the compliment of boasting that I seldom misjudge a person. You and I, Trathan, want the same thing——"

"I'm not so sure of that," I interjected.

"Oh, I guess we do; only the trouble with you is that you're too damned impatient. Being a patient man myself, I should be disposed, if I had any choice in the matter, to give Miss Vittoria time. There was a distinct promise, remember, and although she proposes to break it, you mustn't expect her to like breaking it. Give her time, and give the young man time too. Then we shall see what we shall see."

I returned to Lydia and gratified her by eating humble pie. Garforth, it appeared, was innocent, except in so far as that he had avowedly exhorted Vittoria to "get somewhere out of reach," and if he did not know what had become of her, it was tolerably certain that nobody did.

"It's a comfort," observed Lydia, "to think that her letter is on its way and that we shall have fuller information soon."

Her letter arrived the next morning. It was addressed to me, it was dated from the Hôtel de France at Bordeaux, and I cannot say that it was either comforting or informing.

"I am afraid you must be very indignant with me," Vittoria wrote. "I won't try to make excuses, because you would never understand: but please believe that I am sorry to have been so upsetting. All I can say is that I felt there was nothing for me to do but to vanish. Not permanently—I'm coming back some day. But for the present I don't want *anybody* to know where I am, and I think I have arranged matters so that nobody will. I am writing to Aunt Julia, who won't be much displeased, I fancy. She'll trump up some yarn and hope it will be all right. I hope so too; only—quite between you and me—I have some occasional qualms. I didn't mean to say that; but I've said it now, and it must go, because there's so little time. After all, one must take some risks. Good-bye, and don't be more cross than you can help. Kiss and keep dear Joshua for me."

Scanty indeed was the comfort that could be gleaned from that! What did she mean? What were the risks which she deemed it necessary to take? I thought of half a dozen disagreeable answers, all of which I rejected as too absurd, and which only threw me back upon the one incontestable fact that Vittoria did not trust me. Indignant I was not; but I could not help feeling hurt at her saying so very little and at her having taken it for granted that I should "never understand" if she were to say more. After all, we had been friends, and there had been a time when she had thought,

or seemed to think, that she might safely say anything to me.

I did not show the missive to my sister—on account of that reference to “qualms” which might have been intended to be confidential—but I gave her the gist of it, and she agreed with me that it left us as wise as we had been before. She said—

“Of course, one can account for Vittoria’s conduct in a way, and in a way one can admire her for refusing to alienate Lord Ringstead from his people. But the danger is that she may alienate him from herself. I should like to talk it over with Mr. Garforth. Did he say anything about coming to see me?”

“He did not,” I answered; “but I have no doubt he will come, if you ask him, and tell you how widely his ideas differ from yours upon the point of danger. Please keep him to yourself, though. I feel that I have had about as much Garforth as I can digest for the time being.”

Garforth did not call that afternoon; but Mrs. Adare did, having come up from Capelhurst for the purpose, and it appeared that Vittoria had said even less to her than she had to me.

“What can one do,” the annoyed lady demanded, “except keep up the fiction that she is staying with friends in France? I suppose, if we leave her alone, she’ll end by coming home, like Bopeep.”

It was plain that Vittoria had accurately gauged

the spirit in which her aunt would meet the emergency. Mrs. Adare was so much concerned with the paramount importance of averting a scandal and a nine days' wonder that her niece's forlorn situation in a foreign land seemed to her a mere trifle by comparison.

"Do you mean, then, that you aren't going to take any steps whatever to communicate with her?" I asked, after we had all in turn given utterance to divers futilities.

She shrugged her shoulders. "What steps? One might set private detectives on her track; but it would be very disagreeable to employ people of that sort. Besides, even if they discovered her, they couldn't arrest her and haul her back, handcuffed. Vittoria is her own mistress, you see. The more I think of it, the more I feel that matters might have been worse. What with one thing and another, there has been so much talk about her of late that being out of sight and out of mind will tell to her advantage in the long run. Fortunately, nobody but ourselves knows the truth, and I am sure I can trust you and Miss Trathan to let it go no further."

It seemed scarcely worth while to mention that Ringstead and Garforth knew the truth. Mrs. Adare was a kind-hearted, well-intentioned woman; but, like so many women, well-intentioned and other, she was devoid of all sense of proportion. What mattered was not that Vittoria had done a

foolish, impetuous thing, but that there was nobody to shield her against the manifold perils by which she must of necessity be encompassed. Lydia, to do her justice, was alive to that aspect of the case, and thus it was that she afterwards acquiesced in my doing a thing which was certainly impetuous and may have been foolish.

I now see that it was foolish in the sense that it had so slight a prospect of success; but I still think that, with such knowledge of the circumstances as we had, any one who cared for Vittoria was warranted in at least attempting to go to her aid. Be that as it may, the next day found me crossing the Channel in mild, wet weather, and on the ensuing morning I stepped out of the night express into the dust and glare of sun-baked Bordeaux. It is needless to say that I did not expect to encounter Vittoria at the Hôtel de France; but it was rather a disappointment to me to learn that nobody of the name of Torrance had been there until I remembered that she was quite as likely as not to have assumed a pseudonym. I therefore discarded insular reticence, put personal shyness away from me and boldly took the stout matron who was adding up accounts in the bureau into my confidence. I was in quest, I said, of a young lady whose friends were anxious about her and whose verbal portrait I proceeded to draw in minute detail.

"*Mais parfaitement!*" cried the fat, good-natured woman; "*c'est Mees Breeks que monsieur veut*

dire." And for a few moments I really hoped and believed that it was.

But Miss Briggs, bracketed in the visitors' book with Mrs. Lamont, of New York, and belonging to the same nationality as her companion, turned out to be wholly inadmissible. Apparently she had borne some resemblance to Vittoria, and my fat friend, who had become much interested, pressed her upon me. Since, however, I would have none of that "*demoiselle charmante et richissime*," she offered me various other spinsters who had perched at Bordeaux to break their respective journeys to Pau, Biarritz and Madrid; but although, in her desire to be accommodating, she pronounced some of them "*passablement jolies*," her vivid reproduction of their several voices and gaits sufficed to bar them, one and all. So then I tried the other hotels, thinking that Vittoria might have dated her letter from the Hôtel de France as a blind; but at none of them was a trace of Miss Torrance or of anybody at all like her discoverable. Inquiries addressed to omnibus conductors, drivers of *fiacres* and railway porters proved equally abortive. One of the latter momentarily excited my hopes by remembering quite well that he had carried a handbag to the train for just such a young lady as I depicted, and that she had given him *une pièce de cent sous* for his trouble; but when I heard of that excessive guerdon, I suspected that I was only on the scent of the opulent Miss Briggs again, and so

it proved to be. I am almost ashamed to confess that I wound up by calling on the British Consul and inviting his assistance. Of course, he could give me none, and I gathered from his manner that he did not think my account of myself altogether satisfactory. He had heard of me, it was true; but one may be a sculptor of some eminence and yet be a scamp. This young lady, who was admittedly no relation of mine and who desired to conceal herself from me, may very likely have struck him as a more fitting object for his help and protection than I. At all events, I got nothing out of him, and I left his office with the sorrowful conviction that I should get nothing out of anybody else in the place.

Well, it had been at best but a forlorn hope; yet I had the consolation, such as that was, of having done what was possible. I remember that, on my return home, I said so to Lydia, who was generous enough not to make fun of me and my inept expedition. She smiled kindly and a little compassionately, while assuring me that she "quite understood."

The absurd part of it—as absurd as you like—was that she did, and that it was I who had hitherto fallen short of understanding myself. Joshua, I believe, enlightened me; I can't but think that he also understood. He was sincerely, if undemonstratively, glad to see me back. He did not indulge in any such outbreak of uncontrollable animal

spirits as those whereby he had been wont to greet his mistress, but at the first opportunity he scrambled up on my knee, licked my face and gazed steadily at me with those eloquent, yellowish-brown eyes of his. Eyes of that hue are not, I suppose, beautiful; but all dogs who have them are good dogs—sweet-tempered, trustworthy and constant. Indeed, as I have said before, Joshua was no beauty, and I have mentioned that I am in the like case. It may be that we had other cognate attributes; I should like to think so. We had, at any rate, one bond of union in a common undying and unselfish love (in my case it *had* to be unselfish, and I am sure it was in his) for a person who had given proof of her ability to dispense with us both.

Such was the avowal that I made, the last thing that night, to Joshua, who then and thereafter slept in my bedroom, and I must say that I felt a good deal better and even happier as soon as I had put it into words. Truth is always best, and efforts at blinking truth can only be productive of discomfort. I don't mean to say that I had the faintest intention of ever telling the truth in this special instance to anybody except Joshua; common sense and the looking-glass and other friendly monitors imposed reticence upon me. Still, nobody is really the worse off for having been brushed by the sweeping wing of romance, although many must needs accept that touch as their full share of romantic

experience. As for me, I accepted my lot without any mental reservation—glad and thankful, at all events, to have done with vain pretences of paternal or brotherly affection. Only I daresay it will be realised that my discovery did not help to reconcile me to the long period of silence and ignorance which was so evidently in store for us.

CHAPTER XVIII

"MR. GARFORTH was here while you were away," Lydia casually remarked at breakfast the next morning. "I thought you would rather I didn't tell him where you had gone; so I only said that you had had to leave London for a few days."

"That was kind and thoughtful of you," I answered, "but I suspect that you might just as well have told him, for I have very little doubt that he guessed. As far as that goes, I'm not ashamed of having tried to do what was so clearly somebody's duty."

"He certainly has an almost uncanny gift of finding things out," Lydia observed pensively. "It saves time, but it rather throws one off one's balance every now and then."

"I wish," said I, "that he would employ his uncanny gift in finding out what has become of Vittoria! Unfortunately, that is just what it doesn't suit his book to do. Did he say anything about her?"

"Not much; he only repeated what he had said to you. He isn't uneasy; but, as he and I don't agree upon the subject of her feeling for Lord Ringstead, he thought there wouldn't be any use

in our discussing future possibilities. Most of the time he was talking about a niece of his, a Miss Reed, who is coming to England and to whom he wants us to be civil."

I did not at the moment feel moved towards showing Garforth any civility; for his attitude of calm and assured expectation rubbed me the wrong way, and I had still a lingering impression that, if he did not actually know where Vittoria was, it was he who had put the idea of flight into her head. This, however, was of the less consequence because his acquaintance with a multiplicity of great people rendered it certain that Miss Reed would obtain all the British hospitality she could desire. When he brought her to the studio, some ten days after this, I was, I trust, as civil to both of them as there was any need for me to be.

"I'm putting Sallie through a short educational course," he announced. "She has a receptive mind, and she's all for filling it up with social vignettes; but I tell her that's no way to do a friendly nation justice. So we've been to the British Museum and South Kensington, and we've hunted out all the literary and artistic celebrities I could lay hands on. I've kept the only great sculptor in England up my sleeve until now," he concluded, with a little bow, "so that she might bring a rapidly-maturing judgment to bear upon your works."

Miss Sallie was a dapper, bright-eyed little

person who visibly employed the very best dress-makers. She had the charm of youth, she had the prettiness which even the plainest of her fellow-countrywomen (if indeed one may venture to say that any of them are plain) contrive to exhibit, and she was, as they all are, briskly intelligent. Quite intelligent enough, anyhow, to perceive that if what her uncle said of me was true, contemporary British sculpture must be in a poor way. But she skated with swift dexterity over the thin ice of complimentary criticism, divining, no doubt, that the task of displaying my own wares was not a very congenial one to me.

"That's a handsome terrier," she remarked, while I was taking her round, and while Lydia, who had been summoned from the house, was conversing with her uncle.

"Why do you say that, when you know he isn't?" I asked.

"I hoped you might be open to flattery for him, if you weren't taking any for yourself," she returned composedly. "Miss Torrance's dog, isn't he?"

I said he was, and wondered aloud from whom she had heard of Miss Torrance and her dog.

She counted upon her fingers. "One—two—three—four—and Uncle Franklin makes five. As he told you, we've been reconnoitring the world of art, which seems to be largely composed of your friends and admirers. So like that, you see, we got to talking about persons whom you befriend

and admire. Say, aren't you going to let me look at Vittoria Victrix?"

The plaster cast of a figure which I was a little surprised to hear thus designated stood behind a screen in a sort of anteroom to the studio, whither, after a moment of hesitation, I conducted my inquisitive visitor. She regarded it attentively for some seconds and then remarked "Yes," in a decisive tone of voice.

"What," I inquired, "does that monosyllable mean?"

"Why, several things," she replied. "Amongst them that Uncle Franklin is quite right."

"We are well aware in this house that such is his rather offensive habit," I observed. "How has he shown it in the particular instance?" For in truth I wanted to know.

Probably that was why she did not tell me. She called Joshua instead, and when he advanced, with his usual air of slightly fatigued courtesy, she patted him on the head and said, "Cheer up, sonny; there's a good time coming!" Then, pointing to the effigy, "What price in marble?" she demanded. "Don't be too modest. Bear in mind that I'm the American girl of comedy, and that Poppa's worth more millions of dollars than he can count, and that I'm here to marry the first duke that comes along."

"I am so sorry," said I, "that we have run clean out of bachelor dukes for the time being. We

might do you a slightly damaged marquis or two at a reasonable price, or we could offer you a fairly large selection of earls. As for the figure, it isn't for sale, unfortunately."

"All for your own gratification, then?"

I nodded. "All for my own gratification."

"Right again!" exclaimed the young lady. "It's really remarkable what a *flair* Uncle Franklin has. Well, Mr. Trathan, you disappoint me. It seems we can't do business together, and, from what you tell me, I guess I'll have to put up with a Continental prince. Admit, anyway, that I worthily maintain the British tradition of the American girl."

"I am not sure," I answered, "that 'Poppa' wasn't a trifle out of drawing. The rest was realistic enough, and I refrain from protest. Now may I display myself as the traditional Britisher by inquiring quite stupidly and ingenuously what you are driving at?"

She laughed. "Too bad to be so obscure, isn't it! I'll be frank with you, then, and own that I don't know much more than what you've let out. But—would you be angry if I presumed to give a little word of advice?"

"Not at all," I answered; "I should like it."

"Well, just in a general way of speaking, I wouldn't try my strength against Uncle Franklin's, if I were you. He's about the strongest man I know, and I'm afraid he'd throw you every time."

He threw me that time by taking his niece away, and thus cutting short a conversation which had developed interest. But perhaps I had heard all that Miss Sallie could tell me. On recalling what had passed, I did not see that I had "let out" anything, nor did I greatly care if Garforth guessed—as she had hinted that he did—what I myself had so recently discovered. I was not going to measure my strength against his in the way that she supposed; but I was rather glad to have my conviction with regard to his aim satisfied. It helped in some measure to clear the ground. Lydia, it presently appeared, was more than ever persuaded of the unblemished benevolence of his aim.

"I haven't a doubt," she declared, "that he is perfectly sincere when he says that Lord Ringstead and Vittoria are not suited to one another, and sometimes he almost makes me believe that he is right."

"By his niece's showing," said I, "he is always right. It's a wearisome attribute, and I hope he won't thrust it upon us too mercilessly."

He thrust nothing upon us for many weeks. Presumably he had decided that the time had come to indulge his niece's hankerings after social impressions; for the newspapers informed me from time to time that she and he were staying in sundry country houses of that important order which claims and obtains public notice. It was not until the shortest and darkest days of winter were upon us

that a friendly invitation to dine at Claridge's and meet a few people whom we knew apprised us of his return to London. I rather expected Lydia to refuse, as she so seldom cares to dine out; but she candidly confessed that she was eager to see Mr. Garforth again, "just in case he should have anything fresh to communicate," and I daresay the same motive actuated me when I wrote to reply that we should have much pleasure.

The first face that I recognised in a rather large gathering was Ringstead's. It was wreathed in smiles, and he seemed to be so engrossed in and diverted by an animated colloquy with Miss Sallie Reed that I had to station myself at his elbow for a longish time before he became aware of me. When he did, he turned a little pink; but he shook hands with warmth, while something in his manner conveyed the intimation that he was magnanimously willing to let bygones be bygones. So it was scarcely kind of me—but really I could not refrain—to ask—

"What about wild-fowl shooting? The hard weather we have had lately ought to have been favourable for sport."

At this he ceased to smile and replied, in a somewhat curt tone, "I thought you knew that that had turned out to be no good." Then he looked me straight in the face and added, "It wasn't the only wild-geese chase that I was let in for down in your part of the world."

As a retort, that was fair enough. I imagine that he was pleased with it and with himself; for his good humour was immediately restored to him, although he vouchsafed no more of it or of his company to me. At dinner he sat beside Miss Sallie, and it was apparent that they were having what both of them would have called a good time together. It was likewise apparent that they were already very well acquainted, and it was almost glaringly apparent that they had been made so with an ulterior design in view. The dinner and wines were, I am sure, exquisite; but I am no connoisseur in such matters, nor, I fear, am I an entertaining neighbour when my thoughts (which I never can control) wander from the topics which I am supposed to be discussing. I quite forget who were the ladies who sat on my right hand and my left that evening; but I can well believe that they retain an unflattering recollection of me. When the party rose from the table, I contrived to approach my host and asked him whether Miss Sallie's father was a multi-millionaire.

"Sam Reed is said to be a wealthy man," he replied; "but we don't reckon up fortunes in America as you do over here. They're liable to fluctuations with us. However, Sallie has a little money of her own, inherited from her grandfather."

"I wonder what you call a little money," I hazarded.

Garforth held up his blunt fingers and examined

them. It was a frequent trick of his. "Well," he answered slowly, "I should say that Sallie would have from ten to fifteen thousand pounds sterling a year."

Ten to fifteen thousand a year, apart from natural expectations! One could picture the St. Erths embracing her with tears of joy. Nothing equivocal about parentage in this case, and as for pedigree, of course that is neither expected nor required of the citizens of a proud Republic.

"I see," said I.

Garforth raised his stone-grey eyes. "You were meant to see," he tranquilly responded; "I thought maybe it would sort of soothe you."

In a way, it certainly did. The scheme of leading the easily-led Ringstead to a transfer of allegiance would, if it came off, open the way for Vittoria's return, and I suppose what I longed for more than anything else at that time was that Vittoria should be restored to England and safety. Yet when I remembered that she would find the patient, resolute Garforth waiting for her, I was not so confident about the safety. If I have made the nature of my own sentiments clear, I shall not, I feel sure, be accused of being a dog in the manger; only I was convinced that Vittoria would never love Garforth, while I was by no means convinced that she would never marry him. So I drove home with my sister, reflectively silent. Lydia was silent also. A little shocked, no doubt, at what must have struck

her as an indecently precipitate display of inconstancy; still beginning, possibly, to perceive that other people had analysed Ringstead with rather more precision than she had.

While toasting myself before the fire, preparatory to getting into bed, I asked Joshua what, in the intricate condition of affairs, present and future, he thought one ought to hope for. He raised himself upon his hind-legs, rested his fore-paws on my knee, wagged his tail slowly and sneezed three times. A sneeze, which he could always produce at will, and into which he knew how to throw many shades of significance, stood him in lieu of speech. This time I took him to mean that he was for having his mistress back at no matter what risk. And, upon my word, I was minded to associate myself with that choice.

CHAPTER XIX

To realise a situation or an issue and to see it quite distinctly in all its bearings is always at first satisfactory. What is apt to prove disappointing and exasperating is the slow pace at which situations and issues work themselves out. It was well enough to have divined, or rather to have been initiated into, Garforth's plan; it was well enough for Joshua and me to make up our minds that we wanted Vittoria back and that such action as might seem practicable could be resorted to when once that primary condition should have been fulfilled; but the time for its fulfilment was evidently not yet. Perhaps Ringstead was only flirting with the young lady from America: even more likely was it that the young lady from America was only flirting with him; in any event, the climax of their betrothal could not be looked for from one moment to another. So Joshua and I had to take patience, and I am bound to admit that the dog displayed more of that virtue than the man, though I doubt whether he inwardly fretted any less.

I thought Garforth would be sure to come and see us; but he did not, and it was not until later that I heard of my sister's having gone several times to see him and his niece. The influence which Gar-

forth had acquired over Lydia was really a striking testimony to his unquestionable capacity for bending men and women to his will. She quoted him more than once in defence of her perceptibly changed attitude with regard to Ringstead and Vittoria, and when I accused her of apostasy, her only plea was: "Everybody makes mistakes sometimes. I thought, and still think, that those two were fond of one another, but if she didn't care enough for him to face troubles and difficulties—well, one has to agree with Mr. Garforth that things are best as they are."

That was just where I was unable to agree with Lydia and Mr. Garforth. It was not, and could not be, best that Vittoria should remain untraced and untraceable; for me, at any rate, it was far from best to have to live on week after week without so much as a lifting of a corner of the curtain that concealed her. And what, I wondered, was Mrs. Adare about? Surely she must be growing anxious, or ought to be; yet she made me no sign. I did not think it probable that she would be in London at that time of the year; but shortly after Christmas I saw her announced in the papers as about to preside over the Cosmopolitan Association of Women (or the Association of Cosmopolitan Women, I forget which it was called), and, as the advertisement said that "all" were cordially invited to this reunion, I suddenly decided to attend it, upon the chance of securing a word or two with

the Lady President. This shows the condition of vexed fussiness to which I had been reduced; for it was almost certain that Mrs. Adare would have nothing to tell me.

The proceedings had just opened when I arrived at the meeting, which was held in a large concert hall and was patronised by a vast concourse of women, with a few forlorn-looking men dotted about amongst them. Mrs. Adare, enthroned upon the platform and flanked by several ladies of high degree, was busy scribbling notes, while a fearsome old being, with a shock of close-cropped grey hair and gleaming spectacles, volubly addressed the audience. A delegate from Russia, somebody near me said, and her appearance suggested recent acquaintance with the prisons of that distracted country. She seemed to be very angry about something; but I did not gather what was the matter, nor, indeed, did I pay close attention to her and the speakers who followed her. My one object was to catch the chairwoman's eye—not, of course, with a view to intervening in the debate, but in the hope of catching her ear at a later stage—and ultimately I got a surprised smile and nod from her. Then I had to wait a long, long time and hear, without listening to, an interminable stream of shrill oratory; but at length a resolution was put from the chair, the terms of which sounded unexceptionable, and which was carried unanimously. It was something about the ever-increasing influence of

women with the Governments of the nations (as a fact, I believe Mrs. Adare has always exercised a good deal with the executive branches of ours) and about the importance of standing shoulder to shoulder in the sacred cause of peace.

"It's a comfort," I remarked, after I had made my way up to the platform through the dispersing throng and had taken the hand extended to me by the chairwoman, "to hear that you are on the side of peace. I never should have supposed it, to look at some of you."

"Oh, our bark is worse than our bite," she answered, laughing. "Or rather, we don't bite at all. These meetings give us a chance to bark, which does us good; that's what they're for. When you come to think of it, that's very much what all assemblages are for, including the High Court of Parliament. Nothing ever happens after a debate, except what would have happened just the same if there had been no debate; only a few people are kept out of mischief by the pleasant illusion that they signify. But what brings you here? I had no idea that you were interested in this sort of thing."

"Heaven is my witness that I am not!" I said. "I don't even know what the sort of thing is. No; I don't want to be told, thanks very much; I have no pleasant illusion about its signifying. What I do want to be told is whether you have had any news of your niece."

Mrs. Adare threw out her hands. "Not a word!

Not a syllable! A short time ago I made an attempt, which had no result, to get into touch with her by putting an advertisement in the papers. Very guarded; though she couldn't have helped understanding if she had seen it. What I said was: 'V.—Nobody wants to interfere with you; but do, for goodness' sake, let your aunt know where to forward letters. It is becoming most embarrassing.' I think that was putting it mildly; for there are heaps of letters for her, and people are always asking me where she is, and now her bankers have applied to me for her address. Why did it never occur to us, I wonder, to make inquiries at her bankers'?"

"I can't think," I answered, somewhat chagrined at my own stupidity. "It would have been the natural and obvious thing to do."

"Well, as you see, we should have been none the wiser. The last cheque she drew was dated more than three months ago, they tell me."

"Then what can she have been living upon all this time?" I ejaculated, aghast.

Mrs. Adare could only shrug her shoulders. "Goodness knows! One must suppose that Vittoria has inherited more than a fair share of poor Felix's perversity. As I told her in the advertisement, which she didn't see or didn't answer, it is becoming most embarrassing. I shan't be able to keep up the myth about her being with French friends much longer."

For my part, I should have been willing to throw all myths to the winds and employ every available agency, public and private, upon a quest which ought perhaps to have been instituted at the outset; but Mrs. Adare would not hear of such desperate measures. Although she professed to be quite as much distressed and puzzled as I was, she shrank—not unnaturally, I daresay—from proclaiming to all her acquaintances that her niece had run away, and of course I could take no steps without her authority.

I was trudging moodily up Bond Street, after taking leave of her, when somebody waved an umbrella from the other side of the road and followed up that signal by picking his way towards me through the mud and mirk.

"And how has the world been treating you, sir?" Garforth genially inquired.

"Scurvily," I replied. "I've been wasting the afternoon upon a herd of gibbering female idiots in the hope of getting some news out of the chief of them which wasn't to be had. By way of compensation, she gave me some news which I would a good deal rather not have had."

There could be no harm, I thought, in telling Garforth that Vittoria had been without visible means of subsistence for months past; so I told him, and he received the information with his customary phlegm.

"Well," he asked, "what do you propose to do about it?"

"What *can* I do?" I returned. "I am no relation of hers, and Mrs. Adare declines to move. It isn't in my power to do anything."

He nodded. "That's so. I wouldn't take this too tragically, though, if I were you. As for Miss Vittoria's having cut communication with her bankers, that was an elementary precaution, unless she wanted to be given away. And I don't believe she's in need. Depend upon it, she'd have applied to you if she had required a temporary loan."

"I very much doubt it," said I.

"Maybe she'd have applied to me, then. She's no fool, and she knows very well who her friends are."

"Her friends," I remarked gloomily, "aren't doing much to help her."

Garforth chuckled. "Seems to me that I'm doing just about all there is to be done," was his rejoinder.

Probably he was, and probably he was doing all there was to be done for himself at the same time. I don't know whether he expected me to thank him for that or not; if he did, disappointment was his portion.

"Don't you want to come and have a cup of tea with Sallie and me?" he asked presently.

He had taken up his quarters—quasi-regal quarters—at Claridge's during his niece's stay in London, and it was in an apartment transformed by a scheme of decoration, floral and other, out of

all resemblance to the conventional hotel sitting-room, that I found Miss Sallie dispensing tea and cakes to friends of both sexes. Amongst these I discerned, without any surprise, the commanding personality of Lady St. Erth. Her ladyship, a little rusty, and dowdy, as always; yet, as always, by far the most distinguished-looking member of the company, was seated, bolt upright, at some distance from the tea-table. It was not very long before she motioned me to take an unoccupied chair at her elbow and said—

“We so seldom meet, Mr. Trathan, that I must not neglect this opportunity of telling you how much I have felt for your friend Miss Torrance. I am afraid her father’s death and—and all that followed it must have been a terrible shock to her, poor thing! She has gone somewhere abroad now, has she not?”

“I believe she has,” I answered.

“If you are in correspondence with her,” Lady St. Erth went on, “will you say something kind to her from me? I always liked her, and thought her so—so engaging. But . . .”

My neighbour’s significant and majestic pause enabled me to remark: “Oh, I can well believe that she would cease to be engaging from the moment that she became engaged.”

Lady St. Erth looked as if she thought me flip-pant and impertinent, and I quite hoped that she did. She resumed, in a colder tone—

"Lord St. Erth and I were very much vexed about that unfortunate entanglement, and it seemed to me a great pity, to say the least of it, that it should have been encouraged and brought about in the way that it was. However, we will not discuss that, now that it is all over. I only wish Miss Torrance to know that I do not blame her and that I think she has behaved well."

"She shall have that comfort as soon as ever I am in a position to give it to her," I promised. "I don't myself need to be consoled for the termination of what you call an entanglement, because, so far from having encouraged or brought it about, I never for one moment thought your son worthy to tie Miss Torrance's shoe-strings. So I can afford to be as generous as you are and acquit him of blame."

I must have been very angry—I believe I was—to show my teeth like that; but Lady St. Erth forbore to annihilate me. All that she said was—

"Really, Mr. Trathan, I do not understand for what you could blame him."

"Oh, some people might," I answered carelessly. "It would be unreasonable of them, no doubt; but there are even more unreasonable people in the world than engaging girls. Miss Reed must certainly be included in the latter category; let us hope that she won't prove to belong to the former into the bargain."

With that parting shot, I jumped up and crossed

the room to speak to Miss Sallie, who received me with—

“You look as if you had been doing something you were ashamed of.”

“I have,” I confessed. “I have been conducting myself after a fashion which I am sure would never be tolerated in the best New York families. Not without provocation, though.”

“This,” said Miss Sallie, taking a leisurely survey of me, “betrays chronic irritability. Now, you wait until the room empties itself and then tell me all about it. Who knows but I might find a prescription for your trouble?”

But, not having the patience to wait, and being well aware that my trouble was past prescribing for, I slipped out. Of a truth, the world is stocked with unreasonable people, and nothing, I suppose, could have been less reasonable on my part than to quarrel with Lady St. Erth for patronising Vittoria or with Ringstead for an infidelity which was both justifiable and opportune; but doubtless I was, as Miss Sallie had detected, in a state of chronic irritability. A hansom took me back to Hampstead through the chill darkness, and on the way I conjured up a succession of the most sombre visions, which—had I but known it—were upon the point of being dispelled. For on my writing-table, when I arrived, I saw, to my joy and amazement, an envelope addressed in Vittoria’s hand, and, after hastily tearing it open, this was what I read—

"Are you utterly disgusted with me? I am afraid you must be, and I was so sorry about your journey all the way to Bordeaux. It was too foolish of you! Kind, though—kindly meant—and I have been wanting ever since I heard of it to send you a word or two. I mustn't tell you where I am, except that I am leagues and leagues away from England; but I want you to know that I am perfectly safe and well and everything else that you would like me to be. I often wish I were in the old studio, and sometimes I even go so far as to flatter myself that I may be a little bit missed there. I shall come back all right, you know. Perhaps it may be rather sooner than I expected; but all must depend. 'Upon what?' I can hear you growling. Ah!—but don't you think you might guess, if you were to try hard? My very best love to Joshua, and if you could make him understand that my only reason for leaving him behind was the odious quarantine regulation about dogs, it would be nice of you. Best love to Lydia too. Good-bye. *A rivederci! V.*"

This message, meagre though it was, brought me, as may be imagined, great relief. Vittoria could not have written in that style if there had been much amiss with her. It was only after imparting the glad tidings, such as they were, to my sister, that I began to realise what room for solicitude they still left. It seemed self-evident that wherever Vittoria might be (and the letter, which

had been posted in London that morning, afforded no clue) she was not alone. Somebody or other must be defraying the cost of her maintenance.

"Unless she is earning it," Lydia suggested.

But I could not accept that hypothesis. "By selling clay figures of her own modelling in the streets, do you mean?" I asked. "I can think of no other way in which she could possibly earn the price of a meal."

"I know what you think," said Lydia, smiling; "you think that Mr. Garforth has spirited her away and is paying expenses. Yet, if it comes to impossibilities, could there be a more glaring one? Don't you see that only under one condition could Vittoria, or any other unmarried woman, consent to such an arrangement?"

"That," I replied ruefully, "is just what I do see."

CHAPTER XX

It was only right to let Mrs. Adare know that I had heard from the fugitive; but when I called in Charles Street on the following afternoon with that intention, I found that she had just left for the country. So then I thought I would walk round to Claridge's, upon the chance of Miss Reed's being at home. Miss Reed, I was told, had gone out; but Mr. Garforth was believed to be upstairs, and, after a short delay, I was conducted into a study or smoking-room where he was seated, with the usual big cigar in his mouth and a visitor, unknown to me, facing him.

"Mr. Torrance," said he, addressing the latter, "I want to make you acquainted with Mr. Trathan, the celebrated sculptor, of whom you would have heard from your cousin even if Fame hadn't been beforehand with her."

Vittoria's supplanter was a slim, short-bearded man on the confines of middle age. He was very polite, said he had been told of my kindness to his kinswoman and professed great pleasure at meeting me. I hope I did not look as astonished as I felt at meeting him where he was. He stayed only

a short time and made no further mention of Vittoria, beyond a passing allusion to her being abroad "with some of her foreign friends," which seemed to show that he had not been admitted into Mrs. Adare's confidence.

"Well," said he, on bidding Garforth good-bye, "that's all I could find out for you. I am sorry it's so inconclusive. Or rather I am sorry it is so negatively conclusive."

Garforth, after accompanying him to the door, strolled back, with his hands in his pockets, and answered my unspoken query.

"It may not have struck you, Trathan, but it was pretty apparent to me, that what hurt Miss Vittoria more than the loss of her fortune was the loss of her name. And, as I didn't make out from what I was told that there was any actual proof of her having forfeited it, I started inquiries which brought me into relations with the gentleman who has just left us."

"And who hasn't assisted you much, I am afraid," said I.

"Not much. Down in Lincolnshire she sort of passed for being the old man's legitimate daughter; he never denied it. It seems that there were rumours, though, and I understand that he spoke to one or two people as if he didn't mean her to inherit his property. It's true that he put that upon the general principle that no woman ought ever to be placed in a position of trust. According

to his successor he was a mighty ardent woman-hater. However, all I've contrived to pick up from other quarters goes to show that there was one woman whom he didn't hate to the extent of making her his wife. I expect I'll have to give it up. It was only an off-chance, anyway."

Garforth, staring out of the window and tugging at his cigar with short jerks, had an air of vexed disappointment which at once touched and provoked me. If I was provoked with him for having read Vittoria all along more intelligently than I had, perhaps I may be forgiven; I don't think I was provoked with him for having tried, however officiously and fruitlessly, to do her a kindness of which I myself had not so much as thought.

"You take a tremendous interest in Miss Torrance," I remarked.

"That's so," he answered simply.

Then, watching him like a cat—"I had a letter from her last night," said I.

Of course he never moved a muscle. I might as well have fired off my squib at the tables and chairs, and I imagine that he would have preserved an equally impenetrable exterior whether he had been taken completely by surprise or whether he had posted the letter with his own hands.

"You did, eh?" was his sole comment.

But after a moment of silence, he took the cigar out of his mouth and asked, humbly enough, to be allowed to hear what Vittoria had said. When I

had told him what little there was to tell, he pronounced this account of herself all that we could wish. "Safe and well—what more would you have? No hint of her latitude and longitude, I presume?"

"None whatever."

"But she leads you to believe that she'll be back before very long. Looks to me as if she might be getting information of what's going on here."

"Obviously. And I wonder who supplies her with it," said I, looking hard at him.

He made me feel a good deal ashamed of myself by inquiring in more amusement than displeasure whether I meant to accuse him of keeping up a clandestine correspondence with the young lady.

But I braved it out.

"I don't apologise," I said. "If a plain man begins to get distrustful of you, you must blame yourself, not him. You're such an intriguer! Why, you have as good as owned that you are trying to marry Miss Reed to Ringstead, and your motive isn't far to seek."

"Ah," he returned, laughing, "there I plead partially guilty. I don't know that Lord Ringstead will offer marriage to my niece, and I've no more notion than you have whether she'll take him or not, if he does. That's her affair. All I want is to convince Miss Vittoria of what I saw from the first, that she needn't worry about him. He isn't going to break his heart for her or anybody else.

But I don't write and tell her so, Trathan, for the very good reason that I don't know where she is."

That, at any rate, was categorical, and I suppose I had no business to bear a grudge against Garforth for wishing to open Vittoria's eyes to an indubitable fact. What I did object to was his only too evident conviction that he had but to bide his time. But, as an objection of that kind could not be formulated, and as I had nothing more to say, I got up.

"Sallie will be quite vexed to have missed your call," Garforth was so kind as to declare. "We're off to Melton tomorrow, she and I; it's in the programme that she should be shown what fox-hunting in Leicestershire is like. Then we're to go to some Cheshire friends for the Grand National, and after that we've several other country engagements."

"Including one in Cornwall?" I asked.

"Well, that's not unlikely either," he answered good-humouredly.

Lydia, in whose eyes Garforth could no longer do wrong, opined, on being given a *résumé* of the above conversation, that he had been wonderfully forbearing with me. Possibly he had; but I was not even yet sure that he did not know more than he chose to avow, and in any case I was not sorry that he should disappear, as he did, from our ken for the rest of the winter. Echoes of him and Miss Sallie reached us from time to time, as they pursued

their investigations into English country life under exalted social guidance. It was Mrs. Adare who, paying us the rare honour of a visit one afternoon, told us that the public announcement of Ringstead's betrothal to the American heiress might be expected any day.

"And a good thing too!" she concluded. "One needn't be sorry for Vittoria; one would have been ever so much more sorry for her if he had been tiresome and romantic, instead of sensible."

Mrs. Adare was disposed to set her niece down as romantic, and it could not be denied that she had been tiresome; still her letter was reassuring. Mrs. Adare was always ready and anxious to be reassured. She had, she confessed, no theory upon which to account for Vittoria's alleged well-being; but a satisfactory explanation would be forthcoming in due season, she felt sure. Her chief desire now, I surmised, was that her niece should not be in too great a hurry to return. "Much better allow people plenty of time to get vague about her!"

At Easter we read how Lord and Lady St. Erth were entertaining a large party at their Cornish seat, comprising "Mr. Franklin Garforth, the well-known American millionaire, and his charming niece, Miss Reed," and following closely upon the heels of this interesting item of intelligence came the yet more interesting one for which we had been prepared.

"Upon the whole, I believe he is right," was Lydia's pronouncement, though she had the grace to heave a sigh in homage to dispelled illusions.

"If you mean that Ringstead is right," said I, "I wonder at you, but I won't contradict you. If you mean that the instigator of the whole plot is right, *je trouve à redire*."

That Transatlantic Macchiavelli was troubled by no compunctious misgivings, nor would he allow me to congratulate him upon the successful issue of tactics in which he professed to have had no hand. It was about a week later that he had the effrontery to put forward this disclaimer, after sauntering into the studio and telling me that he had come to say good-bye, as he was starting forthwith for his native land with the bride-elect.

"Sam Reed cables me that the wedding has got to take place in the United States," he explained, "and if the bridegroom's parents don't feel equal to the voyage, why, there's no compulsion on them to be present. I expect Sam don't care to have his daughter going to her future husband's country to be married, as if she was no better than an ordinary European Princess, contracting an alliance with some monarch or other."

I respectfully applauded Mr. Reed's proper pride. "And do you stay in America until after the function?" I inquired.

Garforth could not say for certain how that might

be, no definite date having been named as yet. He did not, however, expect to be in England again much before July, if then.

I was prevented from inwardly ejaculating "Hip hooray!" by a firm conviction that he would do just what was most likely to serve his own ends. If he really intended to prolong his absence until the summer, it was probably because he did not anticipate that Vittoria would emerge from her seclusion before that time; if she should appear earlier, he would doubtless be with us in a week, a voyage across the Atlantic being as simple and everyday an affair for him as a journey from London to Brighton. Meanwhile, it would have been a waste of breath to ask him further questions, and, as he wished to take leave of my sister, we went into the house together.

We found Miss Sallie—whom he had quitted at the door, he said—entertaining Lydia with an animated recital of her recent experiences. She seemed to be in high spirits and had nothing but praise for the country of her adoption. That social intercourse in certain English country-houses had moments of overpowering dulness she granted; but no such reproach, she promised us, should be levelled at her house. She had not yet made up her mind where her future home was to be situated, except that it would be at a substantial distance from Cornwall.

"Mothers-in-law," she observed, "are like some

pictures; you've got to fall right back before you can appreciate all their beauties."

Later, while Garforth and Lydia were engaged in a confidential confabulation, she abruptly burst out laughing and exclaimed, "I shouldn't want to have a face like yours!"

"I can well believe that," I replied. "At the same time, you might remember that everybody would be handsome and prepossessing if he could."

"Oh, you're prepossessing," she returned. "It's sort of prepossessing to have a countenance that reports every thought in your mind. Only I should suppose it might be inconvenient at times. Just now, for instance, you're pitying me because you think I'm going to marry a man who is in love with somebody else. Well, that's just where your wheel skids. I know he was in love with somebody else not very long ago, and he knows—well, one or two little things that I concluded it was only fair to tell him. People don't always marry their first love, Mr. Trathan."

"That," I agreed, "is a well-authenticated fact."

"And maybe it wouldn't always make them happy if they did. I haven't seen your Vittoria Victrix, but——"

"Please," I interrupted, "don't take it into your head that there is the most distant——"

She interrupted me in her turn. "I don't! Remember the warning I gave you about Uncle Franklin. If there's a woman in the world whom

he wants to marry, it's safe to bet that he'll marry her. And as I believe he wants to marry your Vittoria, I'd like *you* to believe that she isn't the only woman in the world."

Those well-intended, but not very comforting words were the last that I was to hear from the lips of Miss Sallie Reed, whose uncle now reminded her that they had other calls to pay. I suppose it is true that I have a tell-tale countenance; yet I shrewdly suspected that the young lady's conclusions with regard to me had not been arrived at solely from a study of it. For the rest I had to share her conclusions with regard to her uncle, little though I relished them.

CHAPTER XXI

THE people who are fond of communicating to certain journals instances of what they call marvellous canine sagacity might spare themselves that trouble if their own sagacity and faculties of observation were up to the mark. In nine cases out of ten the phenomena which they record would cause no surprise whatever to a shepherd, a game-keeper or a poacher, and could be readily explained by any one of them. Yet it is as certain as it is inexplicable that dogs do sometimes contrive to discover things of which, so far as we know, no hint can possibly have been conveyed to them, and although I may not be believed, I am persuaded that during those spring days Joshua was no less expectant of welcoming his returned mistress than I myself was. We both kept an anxious eye upon the postman ; we both jumped out of our skins every time that the door-handle of the studio was turned ; we both apologised to one another for being such idiots, and neither of us learnt wisdom from daily disappointment.

Disappointed we were ; for Vittoria made no sign, and I can only hope that the fact of there being two of us may have given some small consolation to the

more patient and philosophical of the pair. Joshua, after the quenching of each successive thrill of hope, would wag his tail, glance deprecatingly at me, curl himself up and prepare for resumed slumber, saying as plainly as could be, "Well, well! Better luck next time." As for me, I fear I was brusque with the postman, cross with my sister and savage to intruding visitors. If the news of Ringstead's engagement (I had little doubt but that it had reached her) did not bring Vittoria back to England, what would? And it was of such vital importance that she should come whilst Garforth was beyond seas!

Walking along Pall Mall one morning, I ran against Ringstead, who looked very bright, smart, pleased with himself and with the world at large. He thanked me for my congratulations, remarking ingenuously that it was what you might call top-ping luck to get the girl you had set your heart upon and the money your people had set their hearts upon at one stroke. That he had set his heart upon another girl such a very short time before was a circumstance which did not appear to affect his present exhilaration in the least, and I was beginning to wonder whether he could have forgotten it when he said—

"Oh, I know why you screw up your eyes and draw down the corners of your mouth; but I was chucked, bear in mind. You can't say, and nobody can say, that I didn't run straight."

"You did," I acknowledged. "You left the course, or were left on it, without a stain upon your character, and your victory in this second event, for which you entered with such pluck and despatch, is a fine example of poetical justice."

I must say for Ringstead that he is a good-natured mortal. He only grinned, gripped me by the arm and exhorted me to dry up. Then he wanted to know whether I had lunched. Because, if not, wouldn't I turn into his club with him and have a chop and a chat? He was rather anxious, I think, to make his case clear to me—perhaps rather anxious that I should retail his version of it in another quarter. He harked back to the subject soon after we sat down, speaking of his now burnt-out passion with that complete absence of reserve or false shame which seems to be somewhat characteristic of the present generation.

"I was most frightfully gone, as you know," he said; "but it did give me a bit of a knock to find that she wanted some good excuse for dropping me. Because that was what it really amounted to. The way she put it was that she couldn't marry me against my people's wish, couldn't condemn me to poverty, and so forth. I don't say that she wasn't sincere up to a point; only if she had cared two straws for me, she'd have been ready to chance anything, just as I was myself. Now don't you think she would?"

I said, "Perhaps so."

My private opinion was that, with her sense of having been generally humiliated and her reluctance to take advantage of a young man's impulsive generosity, she would have dismissed him even more decisively if she had cared for him; but it did not seem worth while to go into that. As a fact she had never cared for him in the way that he meant.

"So her vanishing without a word," Ringstead went on, "was as much as to say, 'Well, if I can't get rid of you by any other means, I must take cover where you won't be able to pester me any more.'"

"I suppose it was," I assented.

"And when a girl treats you like that—well, you see that you've been mistaken in her, that's all. Not that I'm complaining. I wish her every happiness, I'm sure; and that's why I hope she won't accept my future wife's uncle. I fancy she will, though."

"What makes you say that?" I asked sharply.

Ringstead, with the exasperating knowingness of a man who, having managed to see what is patent to every eye, is not a little elated at being so clever, explained himself. I might not have noticed it; probably I shouldn't; but it was beyond doubt that Garforth had got a queer sort of hold upon Vittoria's imagination. It had roughed him (the speaker) up more than once, and he had remonstrated with her about it, but she had only laughed.

However, there the thing was, and I might bet my life that Garforth jolly well knew it. Likewise that he meant to work it for all it was worth.

"I've nothing against the man, mind you. Quite a decent sort and a good sportsman and all that. But as for her being in love with him—well, really, you know! . . . I mean to say I should about as soon expect her to fall in love with you, saving your presence."

"There doesn't," I observed, "seem to be any obvious reason for her marrying a man with whom she isn't in love."

"Ah, you don't know her quite as well as I do. It may sound rather rot to say that she'll take him partly because she'll hate to hurt his feelings by refusing him and partly because he'll somehow manage to make her think she ought; but that's Vittoria!"

I was much more disposed to agree with my artless young psychologist than I cared to admit. The considerations of which he spoke, absurd and inadequate though they might be, were not at all unlikely to have weight with Vittoria, and when he wound up by saying, "Well, that's my notion, and I may tell you between ourselves that it's Sallie's notion too," it was disagreeably borne in upon me that he and his Sallie saw things as they were.

He did not, however, believe that Garforth was acquainted with Vittoria's actual hiding-place. "She wouldn't let him into the secret. She's

hiding from him as much as from anybody, if I'm not mistaken."

That might be so. As far as I can remember, we said little more upon the subject. Ringstead was full of his approaching voyage to America, of the subsequent tour round the world which he and his bride purposed to make and of the gilded future which awaited their return to this country. An honest, direct, affectionate sort of youth, sure to develope into an excellent and tractable husband. I found myself almost regretting, as I wended my pensive way homewards, that he had not contrived—as indeed why should he not have contrived?—to touch Vittoria's heart. To be sure, there would always have been that sordid drawback of insufficient means. Garforth, with his millions, might also turn out an excellent husband of another description; only I could not believe that Vittoria's heart would ever be touched by Garforth. As Ringstead had truly said, one could as well imagine her losing it to me.

I have often had occasion to notice that a good way of gaining what one desires is to give up all hope of obtaining it. The month of May was nearing its end, and I had ceased to pay any attention to the postman's visits, when a letter, addressed in the handwriting for which I had so long looked in vain, was brought to me. It proved to be very short, but its few sentences were pregnant enough.

"Will you," Vittoria wrote, from Genoa, "be the

good friend that I believe you are and come to me as quickly as you can? I wouldn't make such a very cool request if I didn't really want you, and want you rather badly; but don't imagine that anything tragic has happened to me. On the contrary, I feel that Fate has been kind to me in some ways. Grand Hôtel de Gênes, please, and I wish you could come by return of post; but that's impossible, I suppose?"

Inasmuch as I had to toss a few articles of apparel into a portmanteau, such lightning-like promptitude of response seemed beyond my compass; but, after hastily consulting Bradshaw, I made out that the post would not beat me by very many hours. A telegram was soon on its way, and Lydia was told why we should have to dine at some unearthly hour, so that I might catch the nine p.m. Continental express. She said—

"What *can* be the matter? And why Genoa, I wonder?"

"Let us be thankful that it isn't Jericho," I answered. "There's nothing tragic the matter, I'm assured; so I hope that's true."

Lydia was a good deal perturbed. She could not see why I should have been sent for in such a desperate hurry; she was afraid Vittoria must be meditating some rash step. "And in your excited state, Edwin, goodness only knows what advice you may not give her! I wish Mr. Garforth were here!"

"Heaven be praised that he isn't!" I rejoined. "If there is a living being whose presence I should deplore at this juncture, it's Garforth. Excited I may be; but I take leave to think that my advice will be of more use and value to Vittoria than any that she could hope to get from him."

I do not deny that I was excited, and it may be that excitement and emotion were in some degree responsible for a decision to which I came while packing up. All I can say is that if the reader of these pages be—as I feel sure that he or she is—an ordinarily kind and humane mortal, I do not believe that he or she would have been any more capable than I was of holding out against the mute appeal in Joshua's eyes. From the moment that I had received his mistress's letter he had not let me out of his sight; without doubt he guessed that I was going to her, and while he pattered about the room after me he kept looking up in a pained, half-incredulous way, as if to say, "You can't—surely you can't—be such a brute as to leave me behind!"

"No, I can't," I exclaimed at last; "upon my life, I can't! Hang the Board of Agriculture! We'll chance it, old man."

Lydia gave me a sharp scolding. She said she had never heard of anything so preposterous in all her life. Vittoria would be very angry with me, and very properly angry. Didn't I know that the poor dog would be kept in quarantine for six months after I brought him back?

"I know," I replied, "that there is a regulation to that effect, but my conscience doesn't forbid me to evade regulations in a good cause. I shall say he's the King's dog."

"As if you would be believed! Besides, I am sure his Majesty would be the last person to set an example of law-breaking."

"Then I'll bore breathing-holes in a despatch-box and pop him into it. They never open despatch-boxes."

"Edwin," said Lydia solemnly, "my conviction is that you have gone stark, staring mad!"

"No," I answered, "I am not mad either; only when a sane man finds himself between two alternatives of which one cannot even be contemplated, he shows his sanity by adopting the other."

So Joshua and I set forth serenely together, and half a crown to the guard secured him first-class accommodation as far as Dover. As for his right to share my sleeping-compartment on the other side, I knew there would be no trouble about that. We were going to see Vittoria, which amply sufficed us for the time being. Future difficulties must be dealt with when and if they should arise.

CHAPTER XXII

THERE are, I am told, some strange people who profess to like the actual process of Continental travel under modern conditions. I remember that I used rather to like it myself in the days of my boyhood, when privacy and comparative comfort were to be had at a trifling extra outlay; but anybody who really enjoys being rattled across Europe in one of those dusty, dirty, overcrowded, bone-shaking expresses to which a cruel and needless irony has given the name of *trains de luxe* must, I cannot but think, be a person of abnormal and depraved tastes. However, the accursed things do end by taking one to one's destination—unless they run off the line, as one fully expects them to do every few minutes—so a very grimy and cross man, with an admirably good-humoured little dog, emerged from beneath the Alps on the next morning but one after their departure from London and told one another that they would soon know all about it now.

Anxiety to hear more about it had kept me from slumbering peacefully and sensibly through the night, like Joshua. Certainly I had been given to understand that there was nothing serious amiss;

yet the more I tried to conjecture why I had been sent for the more plain it grew to me that Vittoria must be in some strait which I should very likely consider of a graver nature than she did. But at least she *had* sent for me: there was always that comforting reflection to fall back upon while I surveyed the flying landscape and while my companion (so pathetically grateful for the dubious boon conferred upon him) sat on my knee, disregarding the landscape, but snapping at the flies.

We clattered into the Genoa station at eleven o'clock or thereabouts. There was a crowd on the platform, which I scrutinised rapidly as I descended, having a rather absurd notion that Vittoria might be there to meet me. But of course she was not there, and I was just handing my luggage-ticket to a *facchino* when a well-known—too well-known—voice from behind my elbow said—

“How goes it, Trathan? So you’ve brought friend Joshua along, have you?”

To say that I was astonished to see Garforth would be hardly true; for my immediate feeling was that the sight of him was nothing but the fulfilment of an unacknowledged foreboding which had haunted me all the way from England. But to say that I was profoundly dismayed is to describe my sensations in quite inadequate language. Ludicrously inadequate to the occasion, too, was my stupid rejoinder of—

"Hullo! I thought you were in New York."

"Disembarked from New York a week ago," he replied. "Been loafing around at Milan and other places, and came on here last night to join my yacht, which is lying in the harbour."

"Did you," I faltered, giving utterance to a momentary, idiotic hope—"did you know that Miss Torrance was here?"

"Why, certainly," answered Garforth, smiling. "That's how I heard that I was to have the pleasure of welcoming you this morning."

Impossible to be more explicit—or more crushing! Since he had known that Vittoria was to be in Genoa, and since he must have come from America for the express purpose of meeting her, my own advent, I bitterly felt, was but the superfluous and futile incident that he doubtless deemed it.

"Now what would you like to do?" he went on. "Will you drive straight to the hotel or would you care to stroll up with me on foot? I've told my man to collect your baggage."

Had I obeyed the dictates of strong desire, my reply would have been, "Go to Hades and take your man with you! Oblige me by minding your own business and leaving me to make what I can of mine." But as the manners and customs of civilised intercourse seldom allow us to speak as we should desire, as I did not even know yet whether I was going to fight Garforth or not, and as the

first thing to be done was to find out, I answered peaceably, if frigidly—

“I’ll walk with you, thanks. Perhaps you may have something to tell me.”

With a countenance as devoid of expression as the face of a clock, he signified assent, and, his servant approaching us with a request for orders, he suggested that it might be as well to send Joshua up in the hotel omnibus.

“These narrow streets, with a double line of trollies and no sidewalks, are the very devil for dogs,” he remarked.

Joshua, comprehending and prescient, as always, made no objection to being picked up and handed over to the valet by Garforth, who said—

“This is Miss Briggs’s dog. He don’t bite. Deliver him to her as soon as you get to the hotel and tell her Mr. Trathan is on the way up.”

“Miss Briggs!” I groaned aloud, while the man walked off, with Joshua tucked under his arm. “Oh my unprophetic soul!”

Garforth laughed. “Yes, sir, you were on the trail at Bordeaux; but you wouldn’t have caught her if you had followed it up to Marseilles; she had too long a start of you. And supposing, by an impossibility, you had overtaken her, you would only have made mischief.”

“I suppose,” said I, “you mean that I should have played the mischief with your scheme, whatever it was.”

"Well," answered Garforth slowly, "that's as may be. No; I believe my scheme would have worked just the same; but I should have had to let you into it, which would have been unadvisable. I hope you understand," he added, making a sudden half-wheel and fixing me with those hard, colourless eyes of his, "that I'm not ashamed of my scheme and that I'm not here to offer you excuses for it."

"All I understand at present," I returned, "is that you have been throwing dust in my eyes for the last six months."

"That's so," he assented good-humouredly. "I've told you no lies, though. I didn't know where Miss Vittoria was when you asked me; I didn't know within half a dozen degrees of latitude where she was. However, I've nothing more to conceal today; so, if we can find a quiet place to sit down in, you shall hear the whole story."

Genoa is not a city which abounds in quiet places. We shouldered our way through the thronged, glaring streets, my companion appreciatively pointing out the façades of the sombre old palaces and the glimpses of cool courtyards to right and left of us, while I responded with surly monosyllables (for this was only an enforced truce, and I might, for anything I knew, be about to declare open war upon him) until we reached the church of Sant' Ambrogio, where the two famous Rubenses are.

"Come inside," said Garforth; "we shan't scandalise the saint, if he's at home. He must be pretty well accustomed to heretics by this time, and I expect he has heard many worse confessions from the faithful since his church was built than the one I'm going to make to you."

Having paid the vigilant attendant for not unveiling the masterpieces which were familiar to us both, we took a couple of chairs in a secluded corner of the chilly and almost empty edifice, and Garforth began—

"To put things shortly, Miss Vittoria has been on board my yacht the *Arrocoma* ever since she met my sister Mrs. Lamont by appointment at Bordeaux last fall. Alice—that's my sister's name—was expecting to winter at Pau; but she hadn't anything against a cruise to India, and when I had given her an outline of the position of affairs, she got sort of interested. So that was fixed up without any trouble. Strictly speaking, there was just a little trouble at first with Miss Vittoria, because she had certain doubts and scruples; but I was able to overrule them, and she consented to pass by the name of Briggs after I had put it to her that she would run some unnecessary risk by using her own. Now I don't know whether there's any need for me to tell you, Trathan, why I wanted to get her clean away from England and you all."

"None whatever," I answered. "Your motive was as clear as daylight, and you made so little

mystery of what you were about that I suppose nobody but myself would have been dull enough to doubt for a moment that Miss Torrance was under your protection somewhere."

Garforth frowned slightly. "I don't altogether like that phrase," said he. "Miss Vittoria has been under my sister's protection, not mine. Until yesterday I hadn't set eyes on her since she left England, and I didn't hear from her either."

"It comes to much the same thing," I observed. "You have heard from your sister, I presume?"

"Naturally, Alice had to write to me once in a while; I don't send a yacht of mine or a sister of mine across the Indian Ocean without wanting them to report themselves when they get into harbour. But maybe, after all, I'd better explain just why it was indispensable for Miss Vittoria to drop below the horizon. I shouldn't have had the impertinence to call you dull, Trathan, but your calling yourself so emboldens me to say that I'm not sure you ever quite appreciated the dilemma she was in. You see, although she didn't love that young man who's going to marry my niece, she wasn't far off believing that she did, and she had got it pretty strongly into her head that he loved her. It's fair to say that he had got the same notion pretty strongly into his head. So the little problem was to show them both that they were making a mistake. Perhaps you'll allow that I've solved it."

"Oh, you've solved it," I admitted.

"And in the only convincing way that there was, I believe. If they had been left to themselves, with nothing to part them except the obstacles that you know of, which almost ranked as incentives when it came to a question of whât looked like honourable conduct, they'd have married to a certainty and lived unhappily ever afterwards. Instead of which, one of them is about to make a match which will suit him from every point of view, while the other has had a trip to India and Ceylon which she tells me she has enjoyed, and which I've no doubt she'll enjoy describing to you."

I really could not think that my enjoyment in listening to her descriptions of Asiatic travel promised to be so keen but that I could have waited another week or so for it; nor did it seem reasonable to suppose that I had been brought all the way from England for such a purpose. I made some gruff observation to that effect, at which Garforth looked indulgently diverted.

"Ah, that's Miss Vittoria's affair," said he; "I wasn't consulted about that. I only arrived last night; so there hasn't been a great deal of time for me to interrogate her. Why she sent for you I can't tell."

He could form a fairly plausible surmise, I imagined. So, for the matter of that, could I; but none the less apparent was it to me that I had been summoned to Genoa on a fool's errand. Never would Vittoria have accepted all that she had

accepted without realising to what she had virtually committed herself by so doing. Garforth realised it well enough, and could afford to wear that tolerant smile which might have brought about a brawl in a sacred edifice if there had been any use in brawling. But, of course, there could be none; of course, the advice for which I was going to be asked would be utilised merely as a peg upon which to hang unanswerable arguments; of course, it is not advice that women want when they make appeal to a trusty friend, but approval, support or, at the very least, condonation.

"Well," said I, getting up, "you seem to have been very helpful and ingenious, and the proprieties have been duly observed, and—and I daresay it's all right. Now, if you haven't anything more to tell me, I think I'll go to the hotel and have a bath."

I could not manage to speak graciously to him; but that, perhaps, he did not expect. We stepped forth into the blinding sunlight together, and he distributed alms to the repulsive cripples on the steps (he was in a benign humour, no doubt), and I was casting about me for some polite way of declining his invitation to dine on board the *Arrocoma* that evening when a hired carriage was brought up in front of us with a jerk, and its occupant, a little grey-haired lady, called out—

"I've been searching the entire city for you, Franklin. Here is your mail."

She handed him a bulky packet of letters, which

he stuffed into the pocket of his loose coat without glancing at them.

"Alice," said he, "I want to present my distinguished friend, Mr. Trathan, who has just arrived from England, as you'll have heard."

Mrs. Lamont gave me a diminutive hand and said she was "very pleased" to make my acquaintance. It was all the more kind of her to say so because she was not really pleased at all and because her puckered brow and the rapidity with which she glanced from me to her brother and back again betrayed as plainly as could be that she had been afraid we might be quarrelling. Possibly that was why she had come to look for us. Well, her instinct had not misled her, for I cannot remember to have ever been more desirous in my life of falling out with anybody than with Garforth during the preceding half-hour; still a little reflection should have told her that pretexts had been lacking. She and her brother had contrived matters so cleverly between them that nobody—certainly not I—could claim to be aggrieved by their action. At the same time, I thought I would treat myself to the modest luxury of making her feel uncomfortable if I could; so I responded with—

"You had rather a narrow escape of making my acquaintance some months ago, Mrs. Lamont. If I had only known who Miss Briggs was when I heard of you and her at Bordeaux, I shouldn't have failed to give chase."

It was then that Mrs. Lamont showed herself to be own sister to Franklin Garforth. Physically she bore no sort of resemblance to him, being a refined, fragile little person, apparently his senior by ten years or so; but the moment that she scented battle she looked just as he would have done, tightening her lips and assuming an impenetrable aspect, while she replied very gently—

"I think Vittoria adopted an *alias* precisely because she didn't wish anybody to give chase to her, Mr. Trathan."

I could only bow to the rebuke which I had invited. I acknowledged that it had been presumptuous of me to start in pursuit of a lady who wished to preserve her incognito. "And in any case," I added, "I should have had no authority to interfere with her plans. Only, if I had been fortunate enough to overtake her, her friends at home would have been spared a good deal of gratuitous suspense and anxiety."

"Not gratuitous, Trathan, excuse me," put in Garforth. "The essence of the whole plot was that friends at home should be all abroad."

Mrs. Lamont made a confirmatory murmur. She had dismissed her vehicle, and we were walking down the shady side of the street. Presently she said, with a not unfriendly laugh—

"You may scold Vittoria if you feel like it."

"But nobody else?" I asked.

She laughed again. "Oh, I've no pretension to

shield the world at large from your displeasure, Mr. Trathan; but I can't allow you to reprimand me or my brother. Because, to tell you the truth, we are rather proud of ourselves and pleased with ourselves. We make so bold as to think that Vittoria—I won't mention one or two other people—is considerably indebted to us for what we have done."

"You have every right to think so," I conceded, and the little lady threw me a side look which I interpreted as meaning, "Accept accomplished facts, then, like a wise man, and let us say no more about it."

After all, it had to be owned that she must have been actuated by disinterested motives, whatever Garforth's had been. If she had helped to lay Vittoria under an undue weight of obligation, she could have had no personal ends to serve thereby; one might even guess that she did not view with any special enthusiasm the alliance upon which her millionaire brother was bent. She earned my gratitude, at all events, by one kindly and considerate act; for when we reached the hotel, she said—

"Now, Franklin, you and I will go and have our luncheon on board the yacht. Mr. Trathan can bring Vittoria down as soon as he thinks she has been sufficiently lectured. We won't expect them until we see them."

CHAPTER XXIII

GARFORTH's man had unpacked my things for me, I found, and had ordered the bath which I manifestly required. I had just finished dressing when he came in to ask whether I was ready for luncheon, as "Miss Briggs" was waiting for me. Then he conducted me along a corridor and threw open the double doors of a vast *salon*, whence Joshua issued, executing a series of perpendicular leaps round me and barking vociferously while I advanced. Nothing could have been less characteristic of Joshua than such a demonstration, for he was never a barking dog and it was his rule to await greetings rather than proffer them; but I suppose he must have felt that the occasion was unique. And when Vittoria came forward, holding out both her hands and smiling, with her eyes almost shut, in a way that she had sometimes, what could I do, at the sight of her, so exactly her old self, and all sorts of memories coming upon me with a rush—what could I do, I say, but grasp those small hands of hers and grin all over my own ugly face in response?

I had meant to be cross with her. As a matter of fact, I *was* cross; for she had done things of

which I could not at all approve, and she had made a fool of me in more ways than one, and this breathless scamper of mine to meet her in Italy at her behest had palpably no chance of effecting any useful purpose. So I had made up my mind, while dressing, that I was not—at the outset, anyhow—going to be affectionate or emotional. Friendly, yes, and willing to render friendly aid after such fashion as might still remain open to me; but cool, detached and perhaps a trifle ironical. Alas for self-control and common sense! Vittoria had always been able to do pretty much what she liked with me, and to have forfeited all right to a privilege does not, unfortunately, imply the loss of it, or where would certain Ministers and Monarchs be? Instead, therefore, of maintaining the dignified carriage which Joshua had already done something to impair, I broke down in the disgraceful manner described and heard myself stammering out idiotically—

“I’m so glad! . . . I’m so glad!”

“Oh, but so am I!” Vittoria returned, with fervour.

So was Joshua. I had to fall back upon Joshua to give myself a countenance, and while I was rating him for making such an abominable din, a little posse of food-bearing waiters entered, which put it temporarily out of the question for me to rate anybody else. Vittoria said he was an angel, and I was another for having thought of bringing him.

She betrayed no discomfiture nor any sense of guilt; although, from time to time, whilst we were making our way through the needlessly profuse repast which had presumably been provided for us at Garforth's expense, I fancied that a fugitive cloud swept across her face. But, with the waiters fidgeting round us, we could only exchange commonplaces, and I was fain to affect a polite interest in my companion's account of her visit to the tropics. I took care to address her as "Miss Briggs," and she wrinkled up her nose deprecatingly every time that I did so; but it was not until we had at last been left alone with our coffee that she exclaimed—

"Now, please, we'll dismiss Miss Briggs to limbo and never recall her! Isn't it a beastly name!"

"I don't think I should have chosen it," I confessed.

"I didn't," said Vittoria; "it was Mr. Garforth who chose it for me."

"Which of course was final," I remarked. "From the moment that Garforth signifies his will and pleasure it only remains for you to obey."

I had had the best part of an hour in which to subdue sentiment, and I was now ready to be as nasty to Vittoria as I could bring myself to be, although I thought it prudent to avoid meeting her eyes. I kept mine steadily fixed upon Joshua's tail, by which I was mechanically lifting him off his hind-legs, while she asked—

"Do you say that because you really think it, or because you want me to contradict you?"

"I am merely stating what appears to me to be an irrefutable fact," I replied. "If you can tell me that it isn't a fact, I shall rejoice. But I'm afraid you can't."

There was a brief pause, after which Vittoria said irrelevantly, "I think you must admit that he has been very good to me."

"I admit no such thing," I returned, looking up and relinquishing Joshua, who at once bounded on to his mistress's knees. "I admit that he has played his cards cleverly, and I suspect that he has the game in hand; but I don't recognise any particular benevolence to you in that."

"Aren't you a little bit hard upon him?" Vittoria pleaded. "He has kept completely in the background all this time; he has never written to me since I left England; he hasn't even sent me a message, except once; and that was only to say that he had posted a letter to you which I had despatched under cover to him."

"He had no need to write or send messages," said I, inflexibly; "he knew very well that his sister would look after his interests."

Vittoria sighed. "Ah, yes, that's almost the worst part of it! I can't tell you how kind Mrs. Lamont has been to me; it would be impossible for me to repay her if I were to try for the rest of my days. And she's extraordinarily anxious that

I should—well, in short, that I should marry her brother. He's the best man that ever lived, she declares."

"I think she exaggerates," I said; "I doubt whether the best man that ever lived would adopt his tortuous strategy. But never mind that. Let it be agreed, if you and Mrs. Lamont like, that Garforth is to take precedence of Aristides and Marcus Aurelius and all saints. It still doesn't follow that you are to marry him, unless you love him."

"We shall never agree, you and I," observed Vittoria pensively, "about the reasons that people may have for marrying. We never did, did we? It's because you can't understand women."

I was getting a little warm. "Oh, pardon me," I returned; "in one sense I understand them well enough. I understand you, for example, well enough in one sense. I understand that you were prepared to marry Ringstead because he had a boyish passion for you and that you are prepared to marry Garforth because he has established a rather strong claim upon you. I am aware that there are many women like that. But *why* they are like that is, I grant you, clean beyond my comprehension—and everybody else's too, I should think, except their Creator's."

"Would it," asked Vittoria, "enlarge your field of vision at all to be told that I don't want to marry Mr. Garforth?"

"Not in the smallest degree," I answered. "In the first place, I knew that already, and, in the second, I really can't imagine a much better reason for not marrying him."

"Yet you might—with a tiny scrap of imagination—realise that if there were somebody whom I did want to marry, I should feel bound to refuse him or run away from him. Brave it out as one may, it is a disgrace to be nameless. At any rate, nine people out of ten think so. But with a man like Mr. Garforth, who honestly doesn't care a snap of his fingers about such things and who doesn't need to be protected against himself——"

"In all my life," I interrupted, "I have never heard reasoning so morbidly perverse! Do you ask me to believe that you ran away from Ringstead because you cared for him and wanted to protect him against himself? If so, I beg to say that I don't believe it. Nor can I believe that you intend to accept Garforth because you don't care enough about him to mind inflicting a qualified injury upon him."

"I seem to be making you very angry," Vittoria remarked.

"You're making me simply furious," I answered. "I don't see how I can be of the slightest use or help to you so long as you persist in looking at things from such a topsy-turvy standpoint. I can't think why you sent for me."

She said she could explain that, if I would have

just a little patience; but I suppose she must have forgotten her promise, for, patiently though I listened to a somewhat lengthy recital, I was unable to gather from it how I was expected to serve her. I was, however, forced to acknowledge, rather against my will, that she was in something of a predicament. Garforth, to give him his due, had behaved with the utmost delicacy. Neither directly nor indirectly had he intimated what his hopes were; all he had done had been to make arrangements on Vittoria's behalf which had succeeded admirably and to venture upon a prophecy with regard to Ringstead which had been fulfilled. Mrs. Lamont, on the other hand, had been less discreet, and it had not been easy to withstand that amiable lady's persuasiveness.

"I know exactly what she thinks," Vittoria said; "she thinks that I'm not quite sure of myself, but that I must really wish to marry her brother and that in the end I shall. Perhaps that's what you think too?"

I shook my head. "I don't think that you wish to marry Garforth," I answered; "but it does seem to me altogether probable that you will end by marrying him. Your strength of will can't compete for an instant with his. Besides, you have this idea that you ought to take him as a reward for all he has done for you."

"Oh, of course," Vittoria assented, with a sigh, "and I was growing more and more reconciled to

the idea every day. But when I was told, quite unexpectedly, that he had left America and was coming to meet us here, it was as if I had been caught all of a sudden in a trap! It was sheer panic that made me telegraph to you for help."

"Not so much panic as a lucid interval," said I. "But will you tell me in what way you want to be helped?"

"Couldn't you," suggested Vittoria hesitatingly—"couldn't you manage to choke him off?"

"I am afraid not," I answered; "Garforth is hardly the sort of person to be choked off. What I might do would be to lay the plain truth before him. I shouldn't disguise from him that if he thought it fair and honourable to drive you into a corner, there would be a considerable probability of your yielding; but I should point out that he was all the less entitled to do that because you were so much in his debt."

"Yes," agreed Vittoria slowly. "But—wouldn't that appeal sound rather mean?"

"Really," I replied, "I shouldn't much care if it did. The question is whether it would go home. You see, I don't know a great deal about the man, though I have been acquainted with him for some time. Rightly or wrongly, I have a notion that he doesn't allow ultra-fastidious scruples to stand in his way, and I am certain that he hates nothing more than being beaten. He might flatly refuse defeat. Very likely he would."

"I don't seem to have made it clear to you," said Vittoria, "that, happen what may, I am not going to be his wife. For a time I thought I could; but now I know that I simply *can't*."

"Then, for Heaven's sake, tell him so!" I urged. "After all, the last word must be with you."

"Perhaps I may have to tell him so," Vittoria answered, after a pause; "but I would so very, very much rather not! He has a faculty for probing one's inmost soul and dragging out one's most private thoughts which is worse than humiliating! What I should like you to do would be to convince him that it was useless to ask me at all."

"I can but try," I observed, shrugging my shoulders dubiously.

"Try hard!" Vittoria implored. "Say anything you can think of to convince him. Hint, if you choose—because that's the one unanswerable reason for repelling an offer, isn't it?—that my heart has been given to somebody else."

Shall I confess that the suggestion sent a swift pang through my own? I was not, let me hasten to add, under any sort of illusion respecting Vittoria. I was well aware that if Ringstead and Garforth had failed to capture her heart, it was not because a homely, ungainly sculptor had been more fortunate. Yet such is the frailty of our mortal nature that for the moment I very heartily hated "somebody else" and rather absurdly gave credence to his existence.

"Is that true?" I asked. And I suppose I must have put the question somewhat savagely; for Vittoria began to laugh, although I fancied that the tears were not very far away from her eyes.

"Why shouldn't it be?" she retorted. "It isn't so very many months since I was engaged to be married, and perhaps I don't forget as quickly and easily as some people. Don't tell Mr. Garforth that I am faithful to my first love, though; because he certainly wouldn't believe it."

Neither did I believe it. I did not believe that Ringstead had been Vittoria's first love; I doubted whether she had ever had a first love; almost I doubted whether she was capable of being what is called in love at all. I could picture her cheerfully and contentedly devoting herself to a man whom she did not really love; her character and temperament, as I read them, seemed to mark her out for some such destiny, and indeed I was rather at a loss to account for the vehemence with which she had repudiated Garforth. However, it was entirely in keeping with her character and temperament to evade what would to her be the misery of harrowing his feelings, and I was given earnest instructions to spare him as far as I could.

"But you must make him understand," said she, "that what he wishes for is an impossibility. You can say that I'm dreadfully sorry it should be impossible, and that I wish it weren't, and—well, there are things that I shall be able to say to him

myself as soon as he recognises impossibilities. Only do, by hook or by crook, bring him to that point ! ”

Was ever man charged with a more hopeless mission ! To invite me to use deterrent eloquence upon Garforth was like expecting a child's rampart of sand to check the flowing tide ; and I was further handicapped, although Vittoria did not know it, by the circumstance that a certain secret of mine was assuredly no secret to him. But I promised to do my best, and I was thanked with more warmth than the undertaking merited.

“Now,” said Vittoria, with a sweeping movement of her arm, “let us put away bothers and horrors. I've heaps of other things to talk to you about.”

But we were not to talk about other things on that occasion ; for, just as she was going to begin, in came Mrs. Lamont to say that she wanted Vittoria to accompany her on a long drive. We were all to dine on board the yacht at eight o'clock, she added, and, as this sounded like an intimation that my presence would not be required or desired until then, I withdrew. Vittoria, I feared, was not going to have a very enjoyable drive, nor could I hope to enjoy my dinner, with the prospect of having to tackle the stubborn Garforth after it.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE *Arrocoma* was a huge white vessel, built for steaming only, cumbered by deck-houses and having more the appearance of a liner than of a yacht. Personally, I should not care to possess that sort of craft if I were a millionaire and a yachtsman; but she looked as if she could be forced through the water at a high rate of speed, and I had to pay grudging homage to the combination of luxury with simplicity and good taste displayed in the saloon, where her owner received me. Grudging, because I was not just then in a mood to admire Garforth or anything connected with him; nor was I rendered more so by a perceptible twinkle in his eye which told me that he perfectly well knew I was not.

The ladies, he informed me, were already on board, and soon we were all four seated at a round table which was loaded with roses, while deft, lightly-stepping attendants served us with what was doubtless a most artistically cooked repast. I believe I have mentioned before that I am not much of a judge of foods and sauces, and in any case my companions would have engrossed all my attention. It was useless to look at Garforth, whose countenance would have remained the same whether

he had been on a throne or a scaffold or the crater of an active volcano; but Mrs. Lamont was in a state of flustered expectancy which her vivacious talk about Anglo-Indian gaieties could not disguise, and Vittoria, I thought, was frankly frightened. Every time our eyes met—and they kept meeting—she seemed to me to cry out silently, “Save me! Save me!”

I tried to signal back that I would; though how I was to do it, unless by pitching my host overboard, neck and crop, I had no notion. Even so, he would, no doubt, swim about placidly until a boat was lowered. Meanwhile, conversation had to be kept up, and we all acquitted ourselves with some credit, considering how uncomfortably restricted our range of permissible topics was. Mercifully, dinner did not last very long, and as soon as it was over, Garforth spared me the trouble of inventing an excuse to draw him aside by saying—

“Come along, Trathan, and have a look at the smoking-room. It’s an insult to a good cigar to smoke on deck with a wind like this blowing.”

A strong and rather chilly breeze had sprung up after the hot day; so that the shelter of the spacious deck-house to which he conducted me was not unwelcome. He pushed me into a large easy-chair, chose a somewhat higher and harder one for himself, and began—

“I ought to apologise for taking you away from

the ladies, but the fact is that I've something to say which may interest you, and I don't know when I shall get another chance. You didn't seem inclined to give me time this morning."

What was coming appeared to be so certain that I almost asked him not to be at the pains of putting it into words; but I was glad that I had been preserved from thus precipitating matters when he resumed—

"Remember my telling you in London that I didn't regard Miss Vittoria's illegitimacy as an ascertained fact?"

"Of course I remember quite well what you said about it," I answered. "Have you found out anything?"

He nodded. "Got a copy of her father's marriage certificate here in my pocket. The late Mr. Torrance was duly married, twenty years ago, to Signorina Vittoria Magnani before the British Consul at Milan and afterwards at the church of San Maurizio in that city. I had fairly definite information before I left England; but it wanted verifying, and I thought a few details might be useful, if I could obtain them. So, after landing here last week, I went to Milan and Padua and one or two other places and nosed around. I've seen several relatives of the late Mrs. Torrance's and found them quite communicative. They didn't pretend that she was precisely a model of all the virtues; but they claimed for her that she

had had more patience with an impossible husband than he deserved. He made her give up the stage; he wouldn't allow her to speak to any of her old friends; finally he took her off to a sequestered villa at the Bagni di Lucca and gave her to understand that she would have to be satisfied with his company for the rest of her life, because she would get no other. He seems to have been egotistical and vain to the verge of insanity."

"He was," I said. "He was just the sort of man to behave like that, and what you tell me accords with what I heard from Mrs. Adare, except, of course, that she knew nothing about the marriage. Well—then the lady left him?"

"She did, sir. Skipped, one fine morning, and I needn't tell you that she didn't go alone. A former admirer undertook to console her, and didn't succeed any too well, so they say; for although she hadn't any regrets for her husband, she could never quite forgive herself for having deserted her baby. However, she died of typhoid fever within a few months, poor woman; so her troubles were soon over. It's a singular thing that Mrs. Adare should never have asked her brother whether he was a widower or not. She would have heard the truth, I take it, if she had."

"I think Mrs. Adare was in dread of him," said I; "at any rate, she is always in dread of unpleasantness. What strikes me as much more singular is his disinheriting his daughter."

Garforth differed. "He left her what he would look upon as a fair portion for a daughter. I expect, if you could dig him out of his grave and galvanise his poor little brain into working order, he'd tell you that he acted under a sense of duty in securing a male succession. Men of his type can only see subjectively and only judge by what they see. A woman treats them badly; so all women must be jades. I shouldn't wonder if he had held his daughter at a distance for no better reason than that he was afraid of her upsetting his theory about the sex and tempting him to conduct himself like a rational being. Because, you see, even he must have had occasional moments of wondering whether he wasn't a damned fool. But really it's immaterial. The important thing—and that's only important because Miss Vittoria thinks it so—is that she can now establish a legal right to the name that she bears when she isn't cruising about the world in low company. I've no feeling with regard to such matters myself, but from the first I saw that she felt very strongly about them; so it's a satisfaction to me to have that paper in my pocket."

His satisfaction was legitimate, and in the abstract I shared it; yet I could not but perceive how greatly his case—already so strong—was strengthened by this additional lien upon Vittoria's gratitude. It was a little annoying and mortifying, too, that to him alone amongst all her friends should so obvious a method of endeavouring to do

something for her have suggested itself. But I trust that I displayed no such ignoble sentiments in congratulating him upon his success.

"Oh, that's nothing," he said quietly; "I'd do a good deal more than that for Miss Vittoria."

"I suppose," said I, "there are very few things that you wouldn't do for her. There's one which, perhaps, no reasonable person could expect you to do. And now, Garforth, I'm going to ask you to do it."

In what terms my petition was worded I cannot now recall, and I would not set them down here if I could; for I am sure that they were not felicitous. Anybody can imagine how much I enjoyed making such an appeal, and I do not doubt that almost anybody could have made it with more skill than I did. But at least I was explicit. I wanted Garforth to see that, notwithstanding his incontestable right to hear Vittoria's decision from her own lips, he was in a manner bound, as a gentleman, to waive it, and my rather long harangue was directed more towards that end than towards persuading him (a hopeless task, I felt certain,) that his suit was doomed to fail. He heard me out without interruption and without the slightest facial change; but there was a faint flicker of a smile about his lips when I had concluded and when he remarked—

"Well, this is quite embarrassing."

He paused for a moment; then resumed:
"You're a wonderful diplomatist, Trathan; you put

things so forcibly, and at the same time with such discretion, that it's impossible to take offence at what you say, however painful the subject-matter may be to your hearer. A touch like yours heals the wound that it inflicts."

"Oh, don't spare me," I sighed; "I deserve all this, of course."

"Glad to show myself appreciative, sir. Now, I'd like you, if you'll be so good, to employ these great and rare gifts of yours upon a mission which will have to be handled delicately. In plain language, which I must trust to you to soften down and embellish, I wish you to intimate to a beautiful and attractive young lady that nothing is farther from my intention than asking her to become my wife. I hate to have to say such a thing; I'm blushing all over, as you see; but in these cases the truth has got to be spoken. It appears from what you tell me that I might hope to be accepted if I desired to be. I'm not loved, you say, and that's a comfort, so far as it goes; but such is my magnetic charm that I'm implored not to propose, lest I should be found irresistible. Do I represent your meaning correctly?"

I was too much taken aback to respond, save by an inarticulate murmur, and Garforth proceeded—

"Very well; I can comply with that entreaty, anyway. I won't propose to the lady. What I want to say right here is that even your graceful and considerate way of putting things don't entirely

console me for the implication that I've only done what I could to help a friend in order to make her feel that she owed me some return. I'll just venture to submit that that's not grossly flattering."

"Look here, Garforth," I blurted out; "if I have wronged or misjudged you, I beg your pardon most sincerely and humbly. All the same, I had good reason to believe what I did, and I think you must be aware of it. And I wasn't the only one either. Mrs. Lamont, for instance, doesn't seem to have had a doubt about the matter."

"She doesn't, eh? I'm sorry, but I accept no responsibility. You ought to know as well as anybody that fond sisters are liable to hallucinations. Miss Lydia—a woman of exceptional intelligence, if I may be allowed to say so—has notions about you and the way in which you have bestowed your affections which I shouldn't like to repeat, for fear of displeasing you. Alice isn't a fool either; only in affairs of this kind she don't know how to discriminate. You and I know pretty well what we're worth, I guess. We don't undervalue ourselves—why should we?—but we don't imagine that we should shape for the part of Romeo. That's what our sisters contrive to ignore, bless them! Otherwise Alice would see that, although Miss Vittoria and I are, and I hope always shall be, the best of friends, we were never meant to be husband and wife."

"I am quite of your opinion there," I could not help saying.

"That's because you have such remarkable powers of discrimination."

"I suppose you mean that I have none," I returned, being in truth as completely baffled as I was rejoiced and relieved. "Well, Garforth, I thank you and admire you and apologise to you; but I'll be hanged if I can make head or tail of you!"

He threw himself back in his chair and laughed. "You can't believe what I've been telling you; you're inclined to take it as a rather neat variant upon the old cry of 'Sour grapes!' Isn't that so? Yet you seem to have grasped several important points."

"I have certainly realised one or two," I admitted.

"And why shouldn't I have had as much wit? But if we get to discussing psychological questions, this conference will never come to an end, and I believe it has now disposed satisfactorily of all the business there was before it."

He rose, and, drawing a folded document from his pocket, handed it to me. "Here," he said, "is the copy of the marriage certificate which I referred to just now. Please give it to Miss Vittoria, with my best respects."

I refused, of course, to deprive him of what was so clearly his privilege; but he insisted.

"I expect she'd sooner hear the news from you than from me. Moreover, I shall be too shy to

ask for an interview with Miss Vittoria until you've seen her and broken it to her that I'm not the man she took me for."

"You may be sure," I answered, "that she will want one. You may be sure that she will want to tell you how very grateful she is to you."

Garforth led the way out on deck. The wind had dropped, and the luminous southern stars were shining down out of a cloudless sky. He stood for a moment, with his hands clasped behind his back, and I heard him laugh softly.

"I dislike to blow my own trumpet," said he; "but, between you and me, Trathan, I think she ought to be."

CHAPTER XXV

"WELL, Franklin," Mrs. Lamont remarked, as we walked aft to where she and Vittoria were seated on deck-chairs, "I was beginning to wonder whether we should see you again tonight or not. You and Mr. Trathan must have found something very interesting to talk about."

"Trathan's conversation," replied her brother tranquilly, "is always full of interest. I presume that's why I forgot to look if there was a Continental Bradshaw in the smoking-room. I meant to find out what time my train leaves tomorrow morning."

It was a kindly and thoughtful method of freeing Vittoria from suspense; but it drew a cry of amazed consternation from Mrs. Lamont.

"Franklin!" she exclaimed, half starting out of her chair. And then—"Why, I thought you were coming round to England with us in the yacht!"

"Sorry I can't," Garforth answered. "Wish I could; but I'm due in London forty-eight hours from now. However, I don't see what's to prevent our friend here from making the sea trip with you, if he isn't in a hurry. What do you say, Trathan? It won't take you much over a week, and even if

you don't feel it a duty to escort the ladies, it seems to me that you're sort of committed to seeing Joshua safe home. For that particular purpose a yacht might provide facilities."

Mrs. Lamont murmured something perfunctorily persuasive, and Vittoria, I believe, chimed in. But my recollection of what took place is somewhat hazy; for I cannot pretend to be dowered with Garforth's nonchalance, and although the moment of unacknowledged crisis through which we were passing only affected me in my character of a friendly looker-on, I must confess to having been a good deal excited and flurried. So was Vittoria, as the vibrations of her voice betrayed, and so, very perceptibly, was Mrs. Lamont; Garforth alone retained complete self-control and gradually infected the rest of us; so that by the time the steam-launch came alongside to take us ashore, we were as superficially serene as if two out of our number had not been feverishly anxious to demand explanations and a third burning to supply them.

Mrs. Lamont and her brother got into the carriage which was waiting for us at the landing-steps. This must have been an act of unconscious cerebration on the part of the usually gallant Garforth, due, no doubt, to foreknowledge that Vittoria would make the suggestion which she at once made.

"Don't you think," she asked me, "that it would be rather nice to walk up to the hotel? It's such a lovely night!"

As far as my memory serves, the walk along the quays of Genoa is not a particularly nice one, even when nights are lovely and the turmoil of day is past; but I expected, nevertheless, to enjoy it, and my only regret was that my companion had chosen to render herself invisible to me by enveloping her head in an opaque gauze veil.

"Well?" she asked, compendiously, as soon as the carriage had disappeared.

"Well," I replied, laughing, "'nobody asked you, miss,' he said. He did really. I was to break it to you as gently as I could; but these knock-down blows don't admit of much softening, do they?"

"Do you mean," gasped Vittoria, "that he really doesn't——"

"He says he really can't think that you and he would be happy as man and wife; nor can I. He might have said so before I had apostrophised him in a speech of great power and pathos; but I am not sure that I gave him time."

"It's so extraordinary!" Vittoria exclaimed, half incredulously.

"His bad taste, do you mean?" I asked. "I quite agree, and I respectfully condole with you; but——"

"Please don't be jocular!" Vittoria interrupted; "you make me feel as if we were dancing on somebody or something dead. But perhaps it never was alive. I do hope it never was! What do you think?"

I should have had to be a very much cleverer man than I am to answer that question. I could only repeat Garforth's own statements and avow that, simple and definite as they sounded, they had left me altogether in the dark as to what hopes or wishes he might once have cherished. "But one thing," I observed, "is certain; you needn't any longer have the slightest fear of him. And if that doesn't move you, as it does me, to vulgar and clumsy jocularities, I should think it ought at least to raise your spirits a little."

She flung up her hands and let them fall. "Oh, if you knew!" she cried.

We walked on for some yards before she resumed: "I'm going to believe what he says. I think it must be true; for he is a very truthful person. But that only makes all his goodness and kindness to me the more astonishing."

"You haven't heard the full tale of his goodness and kindness yet," I told her. "Here is a paper which he asked me to give you from him. He has been prosecuting inquiries for many months past, it seems, and this is the outcome of them."

He would have felt amply rewarded, I daresay, if he could have seen Vittoria's face while the meaning of the certificate, which she perused by the light of a street lamp, revealed itself to her. For my part, I am afraid that the pleasure of placing it in her hands was rather spoilt for me by a sharp sense of how different the situation would

have been had I myself undertaken a quest so obviously indicated. But, as I had been too stupid to think of doing so, it was not for me that Vittoria's shining eyes filled with tears of joy and her lips parted to let out a cry of exultant thankfulness. Much more deeply than I had supposed had she felt the stigma of her alleged illegitimacy; much more than deprivation of money or recognition of the fact that she must set herself and Ringstead free had it contributed to her longing to get away somewhere out of everybody's sight and mind. In this, as in other respects, Garforth had judged her with surer insight than I. While we continued our walk, and while I gave her such particulars (toning them down a little) with regard to her mother's short life as had been ascertained, I began to understand what had hitherto been obscure to me. She had thought vaguely of flight, she said, immediately after her last talk with Ringstead, and when Garforth, by his offer, had on a sudden rendered the thing practicable, how could she hesitate? Well, of course, there had been a reason for hesitating; but it had not, as now appeared, been a good one, and at the time it had seemed almost trifling in comparison with alternatives.

"I saw so plainly that nobody really wanted me any longer! I did so hate the idea of becoming a burden and a nuisance to all my relations and friends! A definite break with the old life promised

to make it so much easier for me to start a new one, under altered conditions, when I came back to England."

"Wasn't that rather a cruel way of estimating what the friendship of some of us was worth?" I ventured to ask.

"It wasn't meant to be," she answered; "but the best of friends are rather cruel to one another sometimes, don't you think so? It's because they don't quite understand. In all this, my dear, good Mr. Garforth has been the only one who has really understood. And then I, like an idiot, must needs repay him by misunderstanding him!"

"Praise Garforth to your heart's content," said I; "praise him and magnify him for ever! I can't and don't deny that he deserves it. But believe at least that my friendship for you wasn't of a kind to be affected by this latest discovery of his."

She laughed softly. "Do you remember my calling you a snob one day at Capelhurst?" she asked.

"Very well indeed," I answered.

"I apologised and withdrew the next morning, you know. Of course I should never have said such a thing if it had been a fact. Yet—I'm not sorry to think that I can hold up my head again in your presence now."

This was too much! Her assertion that Garforth alone had understood her all along was true and hard to be endured; but her hint that, if I was not exactly a snob, I had been no more exempt from

conventional prejudices against her than my neighbours was so untrue and unjust that it called for instant refutation. I protested somewhat lengthily and with increasing warmth; for I suspected (I could not be sure, because, after reading the certificate, she had hidden her face in that objectionable veil again) that my words did not carry full conviction. And so, being led on from point to point, and perhaps losing my head a little, I ended by telling her everything. I told her, I mean, that I loved her more than all the world; and although I was well aware that I was behaving foolishly, besides risking the destruction of an intimacy which was by far my most precious possession, I was somehow glad that she should know.

"I hope you don't mind my having spoken like this," I said, after waiting a minute or two for a reply which did not come; "I shall never do it again. I haven't offended you, have I?"

"Not a bit, thanks," she answered quite composedly.

Well—I had brought it upon myself. I had made a declaration of love which could not, from the nature of the case, be anything but futile, and perhaps the most considerate course that she could adopt was to let it pass without comment. Still she must have known that it could not be very easy for me to revert to ordinary topics of conversation and I thought she might have given me a little help.

She gave me none. In unbroken silence we marched on, and it was not until we were within sight of the hotel that she asked—

"Is that all? Haven't you anything more to tell me?"

"More!" I ejaculated. "What more would you have, I wonder? I have told you too much, I suppose, but sometimes—it's hardly one's fault—one feels that one simply must speak out just for once. I promise you that this first indiscretion of mine shall be my last."

Vittoria stood still. "That's so kind of you," she said, and there was a quaver in her voice disagreeably suggestive of repressed laughter. "Thank you very much indeed. Only—is it quite good manners to say the sort of things you have been saying and then stop short? I always supposed that when people went that length, they wound up, if only as a matter of form, with an offer of marriage."

"Quite right," I replied briefly—for I did not care about being laughed at, in addition to being trampled under foot—"that, as you say, is the customary procedure. In the present instance it isn't going to be employed, because the confession that I have made was never intended to lead up to anything of the kind."

"Oh, very well," said Vittoria, stepping forward once more; "I daresay all this will do me good. Teach me to brag about holding up my head again

and so forth ! Still it is rather severe discipline to be refused by two men in one evening."

I must decline to enter into particulars with regard to what happened immediately after that. I am, I hope, as scrupulous as anybody about observing decorum in the public streets, even though the hour be late and no mortal, save a sauntering policeman, in sight. On the other hand, those who work miracles, in the street or elsewhere, must be prepared for abnormal consequences. I don't think my dear Vittoria minded the consequences; I don't think she cared much more than I did at that moment whether we were observed or not. And when the policeman came striding up, I gave him money to go away; so he took it and went.

I do not wish, I say, to be descriptive with respect to that most amazing, most joyous, most incomprehensible (to this hour I must call it incomprehensible) experience of mine; nor, if I entertained so unbecoming a wish, should I know very well how to give effect to it. Visions of impossible bliss I may have indulged in at odd times, as who does not? It is an innocent indulgence. But at no time had I believed that, as an actual fact, Vittoria could ever regard me in any other light than that of an elderly, somewhat uncouth friend. For I have looked elderly from my youth up, and Heaven knows how little cause I have to boast of personal attractiveness. Yet here she was declar-

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ing that she had begun to care for me long before I had ever thought of loving her! Perhaps she was wrong there, though; perhaps the real truth was that I began to love her from the very first day that we met. In any case, she could hardly deny that she had passed through a phase of believing that she loved Ringstead. Nevertheless, she did deny it. She said she had liked him, and still liked him, very much indeed; she said it was perfectly natural and excusable that she should have contemplated marrying him. Also she affirmed that, if anybody was to blame for her having accepted him, I was—which was really preposterous. But these are very private matters, and, although we had a great deal to say about them, I don't know that they are likely to interest, and I am sure they do not concern, anybody but ourselves.

We were, as I have mentioned, close to the hotel; but, instead of entering it, we wandered on; and then, as we had not noticed particularly where we were going, we lost our way; so that, what with one thing and another, it must have been well past midnight when we obtained admittance from a slightly scandalised hall porter.

"What *will* Mrs. Lamont say?" whispered Vittoria apprehensively, while we were mounting the stairs.

"For the matter of that," I rejoined, "what will Garforth say?"

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"I can't think!" she sighed. But then, with a suddenly brightened face—"After all, it isn't certain that we shall astonish him. He's so wonderful that he may have guessed from the first what was coming."

"Wonderful he is," I agreed, "and I won't put it beyond his insight to have guessed from the first what my feelings were, though I myself hardly knew. But never, I am very sure, can he have foreseen that you would—well, that you would be so much more wonderful than he will arrive at being if he lives to be a hundred!"

CHAPTER XXVI

VITTORIA was right about Garforth, whom I found in the smoking-room. His sister had gone to bed some time before, he told me, but he had sat up, in case I should want to see him again, as he would have to be off before eight o'clock in the morning. And when, as in duty bound, I had unfolded my tale, he expressed no surprise, but only said—

"This is all as it should be, Trathan; I raise no demurrer this time."

"But, hang it, man!" I exclaimed, "you don't mean me to understand that this is what you anticipated and worked for, do you?"

"Why, no," he answered, smiling, "I won't say that you were in the original cast. I've told you what I was working for; I wanted to get Miss Vittoria released from a promise she ought never to have given. When once that was put through, it would be for her to choose her future—with the light of a little experience to guide her. I think she has chosen wisely."

"It is very good of you to say so," I answered; for indeed I thought it was.

"You'll make her happy, sir. You're not pliant,

it's true; but you're affectionate, and she won't mind accommodating her life to yours. Her one defect, as you know, is that she is too much given to yielding for the sake of being liked or loved. You'll reckon it a virtue now. You and your Vittoria Victrix! When I heard that title, I had to smile. Oh, I grant you that she has conquered you and me and quite a number of others, in a way of speaking; but that don't alter the fact that she was born to be ruled, not to rule. So ought all women to be, you may say. Well, it's a matter of taste. Personally, I prefer a woman who contradicts and opposes me."

"So that you may show her the vanity of opposition and contradiction?" I suggested.

"Maybe. Anyway, the sort of woman who is suited to you—Miss Vittoria, in a word—would never suit me."

Was that assertion intended as a salve for my sensitive soul or for his own? He followed it up immediately by wishing me good night and good-bye.

"You and the ladies must make your voyage as long or as short as you please," were his parting words. "Wire me from Plymouth or Southampton, and I'll be waiting for you at the station when you reach London."

I was breakfasting in the restaurant of the hotel the next morning when Mrs. Lamont stepped up to my table and, seating herself opposite to me,

announced that she was fresh from a talk with Vittoria.

"I should like," she added, "to say that I didn't hear anything more from her and my brother than I had expected to hear, because it seems pretty silly to have been such friends with Vittoria for the last six months and never to have had a suspicion of the truth; but I was the victim of Franklin's duplicity."

"You weren't the only one," I remarked.

"There's that comfort for me, yes. Why he should have wanted to take us all in I don't know; for I can't accept his statement that he never did any such thing and that he isn't answerable for our disordered imaginations. But I presume he had reasons, and if he's satisfied and Vittoria's satisfied, why—so am I."

Her satisfaction was evidently of a modified order; but I could hardly complain of that, and she was kind enough to intimate—had, indeed, probably sought me out with the object of intimating—that, for Vittoria's sake, she was ready to make the best of me. Afterwards we concluded an amicable alliance, upon a basis of mutual esteem, which endures, I am glad to say, to the present hour. If at the bottom of her heart she still thinks Vittoria rather thrown away upon me, she only shares an opinion very commonly and very justifiably entertained.

Poor Mrs. Lamont had, I fear, a somewhat

tedious voyage in the *Arrocoma* to the Balearic Islands, Valencia, Gibraltar and Lisbon. Her fellow-passengers, on the other hand, had the time of their lives. One does not talk much about such times after they are over—no, not even to the person who made them what they were—but one has the feeling that they remain an enduring, inalienable possession, and that by reason of them life, were it never to have another happy moment, would yet have been worth living. All earthly happiness, we are assured, is grounded on illusion. That may be, and that point, at all events, is not worth contesting (for it cannot, when you reflect upon it, be of any consequence whatsoever); but, admitting it, thrice happy, surely, are they whose beloved illusions sprang into being under azure skies or beneath the cool shade of scented orange-groves! Vittoria and I mean to revisit that enchanted littoral one of these days—not, however, I make bold to boast, in search of anything that we have mislaid there.

We had glorious weather throughout, except for a few hours in the Bay, when a fresh south-westerly breeze got up and the *Arrocoma* showed us what her rolling capacities were. But Vittoria, who had tested these, as well as her own capacities for resistance, in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere, rather enjoyed hanging on to the bulwarks and watching the great green seas as they swept away to leeward. Poor Joshua did not enjoy it in the least. Cower-

ing on the wet deck and shivering from nose to tail, he presented a picture of utter despondency which would have made appeal to a harder heart than his mistress's. She caught him up in her arms and endeavoured to comfort him.

"Oh," she exclaimed suddenly, "have you thought at all of what we are going to do about Joshua when we reach England?"

"The subject," I replied, "is engaging my earnest attention, but I do not think that it would be to the public advantage for me to make any definite announcement with regard to it as yet."

"Because you know," Vittoria went on, fixing piteous eyes upon me, "I really *couldn't*——"

"I am sure you couldn't," I answered. "Nor could I. I think it will be all right; but I would rather not say any more now, even to you, if you don't mind."

It was on a fine, hot day that we entered Plymouth Harbour. I went ashore with the ladies, got their heavy luggage, of which there was a vast amount, through the Custom House and despatched it to London. Then, after collecting the letters that awaited us, we returned to the yacht, Mrs. Lamont, who had never seen Dartmouth, having jumped at my suggestion that we should steam round to that charming anchorage and finally disembark on the morrow.

Our letters were quite pleasant. With just a touch of trepidation I opened the one addressed to

me in Lydia's firm handwriting, but was agreeably surprised by what she said. "Tell Vittoria that she is the only woman in the world to whom I could hand you over cheerfully," was her very handsome method of signifying acquiescence. Mrs. Adare, too, wrote to her niece in terms of warm affection and congratulation. She had seen Mr. Garforth, who really seemed to have been too thoughtful and clever and generally invaluable for words! "And how splendid of him to have discovered what we none of us ventured to hope could be a fact about your poor, dear father! The only thing I wonder at is that you aren't going to marry this admirable Mr. Garforth, instead of our good Trathan, who is a great sculptor, of course, and an amiable creature, but scarcely the sort of person whom one would pick out as likely to inspire a romantic passion. Don't tell him I said so, though."

Vittoria lost no time in telling me, and we entirely agreed with Mrs. Adare, whose remarks conduced to the hilarity of our last evening together on board the yacht. We had managed to make a fortnight's cruise of it, and we were both very sorry that it had come to an end. Mrs. Lamont said that she also was sorry; which was nice of her, though, I fear, disingenuous.

The next morning Joshua and I were up betimes. It was so fine and warm that I thought I should like a swim; so I got one of the hands to pull me in the dinghy out of the narrow harbour, with its high

hills and hanging woods, to the open sea beyond the point on the Kingswear side. There I descried a cove, ending in a patch of shingle, which seemed to be the very thing for my purpose. I accordingly disembarked, scribbled a message to Vittoria on a scrap of paper and despatched it by the returning dinghy, Joshua, who was in a state of suppressed excitement and expectancy, kindly undertaking to mount guard over my clothes while I was in the water. I had a delightful bathe, and if the subsequent walk across country to Churston was a little bit steep at first and a little dusty afterwards, I had plenty of time in which to accomplish it. Upon the whole, I enjoyed myself, as did my companion, who celebrated his restoration to the good dry land by a succession of wide and wild scamperings, from one of which he returned with a rabbit in his mouth. Joshua, I must admit, is a bit of a poacher; but I have never known him devour his quarry, and I believe him to be at heart as law-abiding as I am myself. Sometimes, as everybody knows, occasions will arise which compel even the best and most respectable of citizens to transgress the strict letter of the law. Such lapses, however, are not to be recommended for imitation, and the less said about them the better.

The express from Dartmouth to London, which does not become an express until it leaves Newton Abbot, pulled up at Churston station, and the door of the saloon (of course Garforth had bespoken a

saloon) which contained Mrs. Lamont, Miss Torrance and attendants was thrown open to give ingress to a man and a dog.

"Bless you!" murmured Vittoria emphatically, as we entered.

"Thanks," I replied, "and I'll bless you in return if you have brought me something to eat, for I haven't had any breakfast."

There are certainly points about being a millionaire. The cravings of my appetite were promptly and luxuriously assuaged, while the whole journey was accomplished under conditions which made it seem very short indeed. Mrs. Lamont, no doubt, was accustomed to these semi-royal progresses, for she did not seem to feel that any acknowledgments were due to her brother, who was waiting for us on the platform at Paddington. Vittoria did not say much either; but I think he understood very well what she meant him to understand while she held his hand in hers. For the rest, he was in one of his taciturn moods. He glanced at Joshua, then at me, smiled and winked slightly, then hurried his sister off to the motor which was in readiness. Presently Vittoria was taken in charge by a tall footman and conducted to Mrs. Adare's carriage, and a few minutes later I found myself speeding towards Hampstead in a taxi-cab with Lydia.

Lydia was sitting bolt upright, and her lips were firmly compressed—always with her a sign of

emotion and sometimes of displeasure. I opened fire a little nervously with—

"You were very much astonished, of course?"

"Not in the least," she answered, without turning her head. "Not for one moment."

"Then you ought to have been," said I. "I was, and I still am. In fact, I anticipate spending the rest of my days in a state of chronic astonishment. The more I think of it the more incredible it all seems to me."

I expatiated upon this theme until my hearer's inattention became so palpable that I was fain to desist and approach another, upon which it did not seem unlikely that her thoughts might be dwelling.

"I want to tell you," I began, "that Vittoria and I have quite made up our minds upon one point. Our marriage is not going to turn you out of house and home. Oh, yes; I know the stock objections; but we have considered them and scouted them. Indeed, Vittoria says she won't marry me at all unless you agree to live with us."

"The engagement is at an end, then," said Lydia, with a short laugh; "for I can't agree to do that."

I begged her to be reasonable; but she continued to shake her head obstinately and stare straight before her, instead of looking at me, which was not at all in consonance with her habit.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Lydia?" I asked at length. "Why can't you consent to what we both wish?"

She laughed once more in a rather forced way, and then, "Because," she answered—"because—oh, bother! It's too idiotic for a woman of my age to be shy; but I am! Well, then, because I am going to be married myself. I am going to marry Mr. Garforth. Now it's you who are astonished, I suppose."

I don't know that I had ever been more so in my life. I could only gasp out stupidly, "Good Lord!"

Lydia turned and confronted me with the oddest mixture of bashfulness, defiance and triumph. "Perhaps," said she, "you can understand now why I never imagined, as you did, that he wanted to marry Vittoria."

"Dear me!" I muttered, striving to collect my scattered wits, "dear me! So this must have been what he meant!"

"What who meant?" Lydia inquired.

"I was only thinking of something Garforth said the other day about liking women who contradicted and opposed him."

"I hope I am not contradictory," Lydia returned: "but of course he will have to make allowance for my ideas and habits. He knows, for instance, that his being so enormously rich is anything but an attraction to me, and I have stipulated that I am not to be asked to mix with his grand acquaintances."

"My dear Lydia," said I, "I hope you will be very happy, and I think you will; but I am sure

that you will do just exactly what Garforth tells you to do."

"I shall do," Lydia valiantly declared, "just exactly what I believe to be right and proper."

"Quite so," I agreed, "and it's easy to predict what that will be. In less than a twelvemonth from now I shall see you stationed at the top of a marble staircase, with a diamond crown on your head, extending a welcoming hand to all the duchesses."

"I will bet you five pounds to a shilling," my sister retorted in a very firm tone of voice, "that you never see me in any situation remotely resembling that."

I took her on with alacrity; and those five pounds now stand to the credit of my banking account.

THE END

**RICHARD CLAY & SONS, LIMITED,
BREAD STREET HILL, E.C., AND
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